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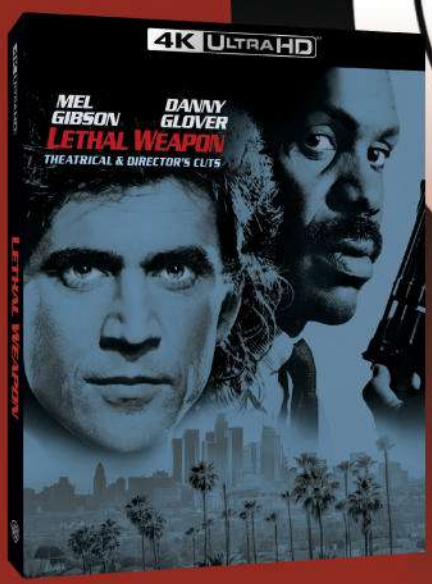

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This issue on sale 5 June

"I'm not going to eat an egg that is covered in beef stew"

Cover: Disney. This page: Disney, Doaly, Marco Vittur

EMPIRE
WELCOME

"OhmyGod. OH MY GOD. He's gonna say it. Oh my God, he's gonna say it!" exclaimed Deadpool in last summer's *Deadpool & Wolverine*, excitedly eyeballing a robed Chris Evans. As the latter threw off his cloak, Deadpool yelled, "AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!" Simultaneously, Evans shouted, "FLAME ON!" As he blasted into the air, transformed into a human fireball, a disappointed Deadpool muttered, "I'm sorry, what now?"

The big joke was that he was expecting Captain America — the king of superheroes — but instead got Johnny Storm, the scorch-powered guy from the maligned *Fantastic Four* movies. Two decades back, in the burgeoning days of super-movies, those two films had their fans, but were undeniably flawed (let's face it, Michael Chiklis looked like he had a pebble driveway glued to him). Let's not even talk about the (Doctor) doomed Josh Trank take on *F4*. Now, in 2025, Marvel has another chance to do right by its First Family — and make that Deadpool joke out of date. And signs are looking good.

For our epic cover story, John Nugent travelled to a parallel universe (okay, Pinewood) to hang out with the quartet and their trusty robot. Everything was slick, gleaming and confident, right down to Pedro Pascal's smile. And as a lead-in to next summer's *Avengers: Doomsday*, *First Steps* is giving the Four their true event-movie moment. Flame on? We'll find out soon — head to page 48, meanwhile, to get the inside scoop.

This issue isn't just packed with heroes — it's riddled with supervillains, too. Galactus

himself, Ralph Ineson, tells us why the planet-munching maniac isn't as bad as Finchy from *The Office*. And we even managed to pin down DC mega-baddie Lex Luthor, aka Nicholas Hoult, for a kryptonite-tinted photoshoot and wonderfully candid interview. Starting on page 68, Hoult talks to Hayley Campbell about bald bonces, bold choices and a visit to a framing shop that would make Superman blush.

Enjoy the issue.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Doaly
A UK-based graphic designer and digital illustrator, Doaly has a passion for storytelling, with his client list including Disney, Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm and Warner Bros. See more of his fantastic work at doaly.com

TURN TO PAGE 32 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION*

* Please note that your first issue may not be the cover displayed

Empire, (ISSN 0957-4948, USPS 6398) is published every 4 Weeks by H Bauer Publishing Ltd, The Lantern, 75 Hampstead Road, London, NW1 2PL, United Kingdom. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Empire, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Subscription records are maintained at Bauer Media, Subscriptions, CDS Global, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Lathkill Street, Market Harborough, Leicester LE16 9EF, United Kingdom. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.

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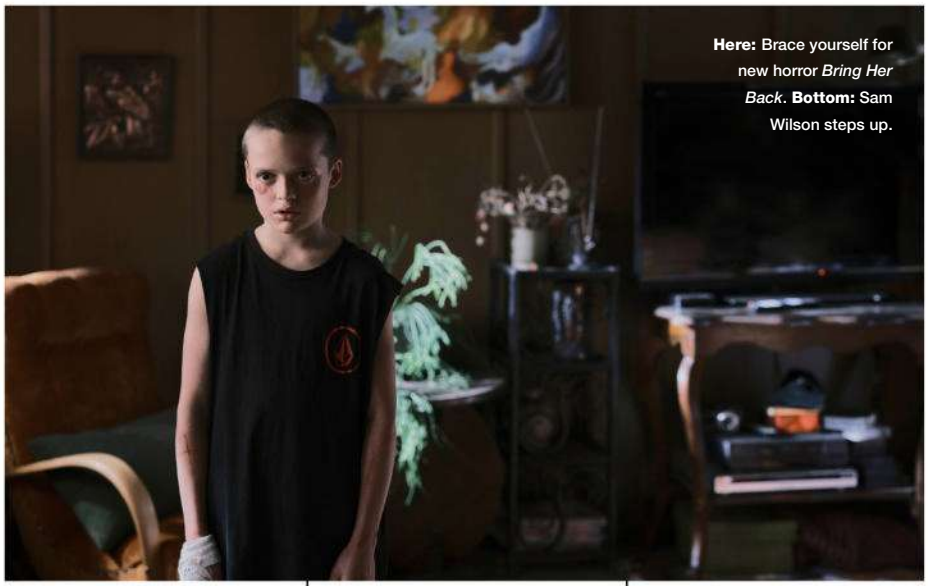

Here: Brace yourself for new horror *Bring Her Back*. **Bottom:** Sam Wilson steps up.

first word

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final cut

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104 THE RANKING *Saturday Night Live* movies. They're not worthy.

110 JASON ISAACS The anecdote machine and *White Lotus* star enters our Time Capsule. Remember: these are the stories we *could* print.

DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

JOHN NUGENT VISITED THE *FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS* SET

"My Fantastic Four experience was, well, fantastic. I hung out in Reed Richards' lab, took some interior-design inspo from the Baxter Building living room, met H.E.R.B.I.E. the robot *and* the Fantasti-Car, and witnessed a Pedro Pascal dance party. Sadly he doesn't stretch in real life."

BEN TRAVIS KICKED BACK WITH THE PHILIPPOU BROTHERS

"When I saw *Talk To Me*, it absolutely ripped my head off (in the best way). So I'm not only thrilled that the Philippou brothers didn't drop the ball on *Bring Her Back*, but also that they proved just as wildly entertaining in real life — talking wrestling, possession and sharp knives."

MONICA MAY PHOTOGRAPHED NICHOLAS HOULT

"A day collaborating with Nicholas left me inspired. He was generous with the crew and had a great, self-effacing sense of humour. When I mentioned that one of his poses reminded me of a Danish painting, he thanked me for referring to him as a Danish pastry. A true artist and gent."

A24/Sony, Disney, © MARVEL 2025, Monica May. Spinelines issue 441: Newsstand: "That manager's in for a long discussion about the Jurassic period" is from *The Mitchells Vs The Machines*. Subs: "But what if Andy gets another dinosaur, a mean one?" is from *Toy Story*

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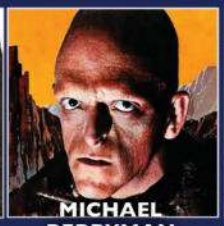
ANDOR, ADOLESCENCE

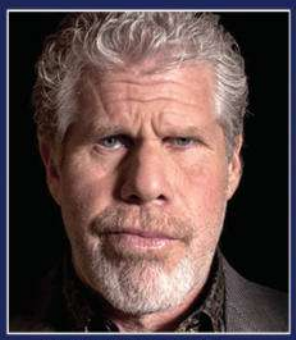
BRENDAN WAYNE
MANDALORIAN

CARLA GUGINO
FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER



MICHAEL BERRYMAN
THE HILLS HAVE EYES

POM KLEMENTIEFF
GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY



RON PERLMAN
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SONS OF ANARCHY

RICHARD DREYFUSS
JAWS, CLOSE ENCCOUNTERS
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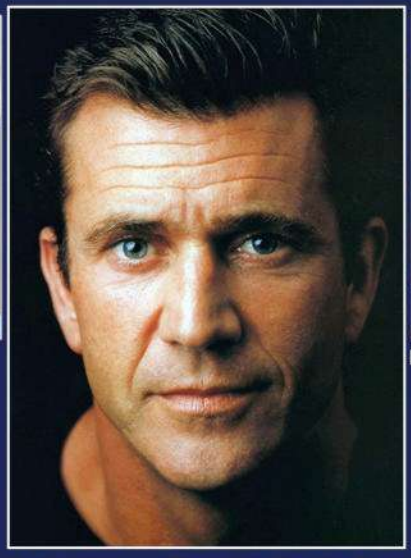

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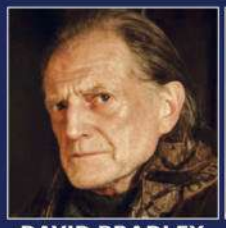
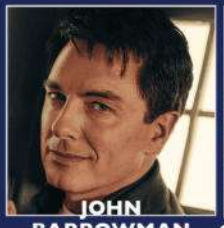


DAVID BRADLEY
POTTER GOT, DR WHO

ARIYON BAKARE
GOOD OMENS DR WHO, LIFE



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THE BEYOND, SHARK'S CAVE

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AGENTS OF SHIELD

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EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

DON'T PULL THE PLUG

Longtime reader and listener here: I've listened to every episode of the Empire Film Podcast, including most of the Spoiler Specials, and it's always a highlight of my week. I've also now listened to the first two episodes of 'The Shameless Plug' and really enjoyed them! I think it's great you're promoting the current issue, while also giving us a peek behind the curtain.

ADAM D. JAMESON, VIA EMAIL

*A shameless plug for 'The Shameless Plug'! How extremely meta. For your kind and insightful words, Adam, have a Picturehouse membership on us. (*The Empire Podcast *and* The Shameless Plug *are available wherever fine podcasts are available.)*

Picturehouse *Empire*'s star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.

ON *ANDOR* SEASON 2:
"Possibly the best TV episodes I have ever seen, especially Episode 8. Brilliantly written, shot and acted."
GRAHAM TOMLINSON

POTTY PICTURES

In your January 2025 edition, you commented on the Letter Of The Month about *Perfect Days* that it was the "best toilet-based film since 2006's *Flushed Away*". As an Australian, I am greatly offended. Everyone knows that *Kenny* is the best 2006 toilet-based movie and easily the best toilet movie ever. Still, love reading the magazine on the throne!

ANDREW WEST, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Okay. Gauntlet laid down. Let's hear it, readers: what is your *favourite 2006 toilet-based movie?*

ON THE RETURN OF *JESSICA JONES*
"*Jessica Jones* Season 1 is the best television Marvel has made to this day. Yes, even better than *WandaVision*."
@JAMRAM33.BSKY.SOCIAL

BACK FOR BLOOD

Just seen the excellent *Sinners* in IMAX. Surely a '60s-set sequel, 'Sinners 2: Hoodoo Boogaloo', has to happen?!

PAUL NAPLETON, WYMONDHAM

Very strong work, Paul. Though we would also accept 'Sinners & Saints'*,* 'Sinners 2: Back In The Habit'*, or* 'Sinniers'*.*

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
AFTER KRYPTO AND SUPERMAN, WHICH SUPERHERO/ANIMAL TEAM-UP DO YOU WANT TO SEE?

We absolutely need to have Batman teaming up with Detective Chimp.
@DTHESLOP.BSKY.SOCIAL

We're long overdue Kitty Pryde getting a starring role in the X-Men films, and I'd like to see her front and centre, complete with her dragon, Lockheed.
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Squirrel Girl & squirrels. I know nothing about the character but am intrigued as to what the superpowers of a squirrel might be.
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Animal Man (Buddy Baker) and all of them.
@KELLY-KNOX.COM

Batman and Batbat.
@MRNEILALCOCK.BSKY.SOCIAL

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

THE OTHER *FANTASTIC FOUR* APRIL 2007

This isn't *Empire*'s first Fantastic Four cover. Back in 2007, we ran a set-visit cover feature for the Fox-era sequel *Rise Of The Silver Surfer*. It's a fascinating look at a superhero boom still in its infancy, with director Tim Story candidly acknowledging to us that the childlike tone of his first *F4* effort got "a pretty good whipping".

While that era's Sue Storm, Jessica Alba, argued that "this is definitely more grown-up than the last one", our reporter nevertheless witnessed the film's Reed Richards, Ioan Gruffudd, catching a case of the giggles during a take. "I was laughing at it myself," he told us. "I was thinking 'God, this is so cheesy.' But it's what's needed for this sort of movie." Will the MCU-era *Fantastic Four* offer similar levels of cheese? We'll find out in July...

Warner Bros.

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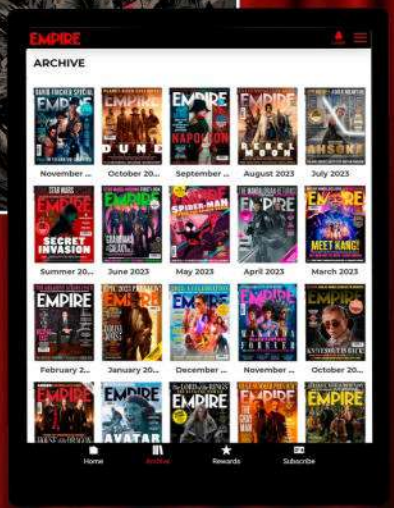

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

JULY 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

How the UK became a blockbuster factory

TRUMP'S PROPOSED MOVIE TARIFFS HIGHLIGHT THE RAPIDLY RISING DEMAND TO SHOOT ON THIS SIDE OF THE POND

WORDS **AL HORNER**

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL ARE used to getting letters: complaints from residents about the roadworks outside Lidl, questions about bin day, that sort of thing. What they're probably less used to in their mailbag are letters from one of the biggest box-office icons of our time, sent all the way from Pandora. Last April, James Cameron took time out from production on his upcoming *Avatar* sequels to urge local powers-that-be to grant planning permission for a huge new complex of soundstages, known as Marlow Studios. "The next iteration of screen storytelling requires a purpose-built working space of exceptional quality," wrote the director, detailing plans to base a division of his company Lightstorm there, should the proposed 1.8-million-square-feet facility get greenlit.

Why is the man who brought us *The Terminator* and *Titanic* looking to relocate part of his filmmaking operation to somewhere just off the M25? Perhaps because, quite simply, everyone else is. Last month, when Donald Trump announced plans to levy tariffs on "any and all movies produced in foreign lands" in a bid to force film production back into the States, he didn't name the UK as the place that's usurped California as the new central hub of blockbuster movie production. But looking at the sheer number of huge films shot around the British capital does beg the question: is London the new Hollywood?

A large proportion of last year's biggest American movies (the non-animated ones, at least) were created within reach of a Greggs bakery, after all. *Deadpool & Wolverine* filmed at Pinewood Studios in Iver Heath. *Wicked* saw Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande decamp to Borehamwood's Sky Studios Elstree facility, where the upcoming *Jurassic World Rebirth* was also produced. And you only need to look at what's currently being shot or is gearing up to be shot on London soundstages to get a sense that 2024 was no anomaly. The Russo Brothers, Robert Downey Jr and co are currently hard at work on *Avengers: Doomsday* at Pinewood, hot on the heels of another recent Pinewood/Marvel production, *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*. A mysterious new J.J. Abrams thriller starring

Clockwise from main: Hurray for, er, London; *Wicked* director Jon M. Chu on set; Welcome to Shinfield; Hugh Jackman and Ryan Reynolds in *Deadpool & Wolverine*.

Jenna Ortega is currently being shot at Warner Bros. Studios Leavesden, before work begins there on new *Harry Potter* and *Game Of Thrones* HBO reboots/spin-offs. At Shepperton Studios, meanwhile, which Amazon MGM has made its unofficial home for production, Michael B. Jordan has been busy on his *Sinners* follow-up, a remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair*.

Dean Horne is VP of Global Studio Operations at Shinfield Studios, one of the newest facilities to open in response to the rise in demand from Hollywood studios looking to bring their productions to our shores. He says it's not just the major economic incentives offered by the government — 40 per cent tax breaks for big productions, 53 per cent tax breaks for productions with budgets of under $15 million — that have drawn blockbusters to soundstages like his, where the recent *Star Wars* series *The Acolyte* and upcoming disaster movie *Greenland: Migration* were shot. "The UK has a history of supporting and nurturing the screen industries. The result of that is we have a brilliant and large crew base here. The facilities here are world-class. And then ›

there's the softer stuff: great hotels, incredible restaurants... if you're shooting at Shinfield you can stay at The Dorchester in London and be on set in an hour."

Hollywood blockbusters shooting in the UK is of course nothing new — *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* and *Star Wars: A New Hope* are just two movies you may have heard of that were shot at Elstree almost half a century ago. What *is* new is the volume of them shooting here. A record $6 billion was spent by US studios and streamers in the UK last year, according to a report by the British Film Institute. Driving those numbers might be the fact that in previous decades, if a film was set in a US city, the production was forced to utilise on-location filmmaking. But not anymore, thanks to advances in technology. *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire*, which was largely shot at Shinfield, for example, recreated New York City in Reading (walking into work and seeing the Ghostbusters firehouse HQ recreated from scratch in a mock-up Big Apple was a surreal "pinch-me moment" says Horne).

And there are creative advantages as well as cost-cutting ones: London has a huge variety of different-looking, interesting locales on its doorstep, both in the UK and in Europe. *House Of The Dragon*, for example, which is currently shooting its third season at Warner Bros. Studios Leavesden, benefits from its cast and crew being able to hop over to Spain to film scenes depicting King's Landing, and Cornwall for scenes set in Driftmark, the ancestral seat of House Velaryon.

All of which might suggest that everyone is winning from London's takeover of US production. Hollywood studios make cheaper films. The UK, meanwhile, enjoys a financial shot in the arm from this influx of business (Warner Bros. has claimed that filming 2023's *Barbie* at Leavesden created 685 jobs and generated £80 million for the economy). Not everyone is entirely convinced, however. There are those in UK film who suggest that the influx of Hollywood productions has hindered rather than helped the UK's own filmmaking culture.

"There is a kind of dominance which has squashed our smaller productions," says Mike Newell, director of *Four Weddings And A Funeral* and *Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire*, pointing out that, despite the world-leading facilities and talent the UK has to offer, "it's very, very difficult getting British films financed. There's no trickle-down effect." Newell suggests some sort of government

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER REBOOT

There's a new chosen one in town. *Skeleton Crew* star **Ryan Kiera Armstrong** has been cast as the lead in the untitled Buffyverse series, starring opposite Sarah Michelle Gellar as she reprises her iconic role, with Chloé Zhao directing the pilot.

HERE COMES THE FLOOD

Denzel Washington, Robert Pattinson and Daisy Edgar-Jones will star — one as a bank guard, one as a teller, and one as a master thief — in Netflix's "unconventional" heist movie, written by Simon Kinberg and directed by *The Two Popes*' Fernando Meirelles.

REPTILIA

Newly minted Oscar-winner **Mikey Madison** will appear alongside Kirsten Dunst in this wacky-sounding tale from *Monos* director Alejandro Landes Echavarría, which follows a dental hygienist who is introduced to the world of exotic-animal trading by an enigmatic mermaid.

Clockwise from far left: *House Of The Dragon*; Shinfield Studios; Amandla Stenberg, Lee Jung-jae and Leslye Headland on set of *The Acolyte*; Filming *Jurassic World Rebirth* in Borehamwood.

Disney, HBO, Shinfield Studios, Universal

intervention, diverting a certain portion of the billions spent in the UK by US studios annually towards helping British emerging filmmakers.

Whatever tweaks the current relationship between London and Hollywood might require, and whatever challenges posed by Trump's tariffs, it's a partnership that seems unlikely to slow down anytime soon. Warner Bros. is midway through a massive expansion to its Leavesden campus. An announcement is reportedly near in the proposals for Marlow Studios, after years of legal wrangling over conservation concerns. And there are signs that the boom may soon spread beyond London, with a £450 million new site called Crown Works Studios recently announced as coming to Sunderland.

In other words, county councils, beware: James Cameron might not be the last A-list auteur penning you a letter.

STRANGE ARRIVALS

Based on Toby Ball's popular podcast of the same name, **Colman Domingo** and Demi Moore will play real-life couple Barney and Betty Hill, whose romance was tested when they shot to fame after being the first reported case of alien abduction back in 1961.

TEENAGE SEX AND DEATH AT CAMP MIASMA

I Saw The TV Glow writer-director Jane Schoenbrun is back. Starring **Gillian Anderson** and Hannah Einbinder, their new horror sees the director of a movie in a fictional slasher franchise become obsessed with the original film's final girl.

THE PEASANT

Following 2024's *Monkey Man*, **Dev Patel** is reasserting his triple-threat status (writer, director and star) once again with another revenge-fuelled action thriller. This one, set in the 1300s, will bring together the worlds of medieval knights and feudal India. Erm, sold!

HUNGER GAMES: SUNRISE ON THE REAPING

The latest *The Hunger Games* instalment, which follows Haymitch (originally played by Woody Harrelson, this time by Joseph Zada) during his time in the arena, has fleshed out its cast — which now includes **Maya Hawke**, Jesse Plemons and Mckenna Grace.

HOW TO ROB A BANK

David Leitch has assembled a seriously starry line-up for his next film, with **Nicholas Hoult**, Zoë Kravitz, Pete Davidson and *Shōgun*'s Anna Sawai all on board. No plot details confirmed yet, but expect thrilling vault-based action from the *Bullet Train* and *The Fall Guy* director.

Getty Images, Imago

It takes three, baby

CELINE SONG RETURNS TO THE TRICKY LOVE TRIANGLE IN HER *PAST LIVES* FOLLOW-UP **MATERIALISTS**

WORDS **IANA MURRAY**

FEW COULD HAVE predicted the trajectory of Celine Song's *Past Lives*. Her feature debut about the emotional reunion between a married writer (Greta Lee) and her first love (Teo Yoo) went from one of the most acclaimed films of 2023 to a Best Picture nominee. It's a tough act to follow, but with *Materialists*, Song returns with a new romantic drama that once again probes into the thorny premise that made *Past Lives* so devastating: the love triangle.

At its centre is Dakota Johnson's Lucy, a skilled matchmaker who treats romance like a corporate merger. Standing at six feet tall and having a six-figure salary are assets in the "marketplace" of dating in her world. But Lucy's own love life isn't quite so calculable, as she finds herself drawn to both the über-wealthy Harry (Pedro Pascal) and her broke ex, John (Chris Evans). "I wanted to depict people on the

opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to the value system that Lucy says she's an expert in," Song tells *Empire*. "You couldn't get less valuable than John," a down-on-his-luck actor still living in a shared apartment. As for Pascal's suave suitor, "You couldn't get more valuable than Harry."

When writing *Past Lives*, Song drew from her relationships with both her childhood sweetheart and her husband (Justin Kuritzkes, who coincidentally wrote tennis throuple drama *Challengers*). For *Materialists*, she mined her own experiences as a matchmaker, a temporary job she took up to help with rent during her early playwriting career in New York. "I learned more about people in those six months than I did in any other part of my life," Song recalls. "People will just tell you what's in their hearts, and what they're worried about. They would say something so brave in my eyes, which is: 'I want to fall in love.'"

What Song struggled to reconcile was that whole-hearted pursuit of love, versus how her clients envisioned their ideal partner: with decidedly unromantic categorisations like height, age and income. "You're describing the love of your life, and all you can say are things that an insurance company would say," she explains. It's not unlike what you'd see swiping on a dating app.

The film's opposing love interests embody that clash between reasonable and unreasonable desires explored in Lucy's line of work. "The heart and the head, and then the math and the non-math," Song summarises. "Those crash into each other in this film."

But the dynamic was also informed by the cast. In *Past Lives*, the filmmaker kept her actors apart when they weren't filming to authentically depict the distance between their characters on screen. For *Materialists*, Song simply couldn't separate her co-stars. "They're just so into each other," she laughs. Instead, she built on their natural chemistry through rehearsals and script work. "We were trying to be specific about the chemistry between them as characters too," she adds. "Because it has a different meaning and a different goal for each scene."

For Song, building relationships is more than just that initial spark — it's about the evolution. "So much of it is about finding what the characters are feeling tension about." No dynamic is quite as tense as the love triangle — but in a Celine Song movie, the more the merrier.

***MATERIALISTS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 15 AUGUST**

Clockwise from main: Lucy (Dakota Johnson) and Harry (Pedro Pascal) — bonded by his bucks?; Director Celine Song laughs with Johnson and Chris Evans; Are things catching fire again between Lucy and ex John (Evans)?

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON... TONY

IT SPOTLIGHTS A YOUNG BUCK ANTHONY BOURDAIN

This A24-backed, Matt Johnson-directed biopic of the late legendary chef follows him as a fresh college dropout in 1976. As documented in his bestselling debut book *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures In The Culinary Underbelly*, teen tearaway Bourdain cut his teeth working low-rung jobs at seafood restaurants in Provincetown, Massachusetts. "I was — to be frank — a spoiled, miserable, narcissistic, self-destructive, and thoughtless young lout," he wrote of his 20-year-old self.

ITS STAR IS ON FAMILIAR TURF

Dominic Sessa was announced to play Bourdain in April. The 22-year-old has so far appeared in just one film, as a troubled yet talented student in *The Holdovers*, also set in '70s Massachusetts. Sessa was cast with limited acting experience (he'd never been on camera before), but his performance made him one of Hollywood's hottest tickets and helped land him the role of the wayward cook. Sessa will be joined by Antonio Banderas, whose part is currently under wraps.

IT MIGHT NOT BE A STANDARD BIOPIC

Johnson's 2023 film *BlackBerry* followed the men behind the rise and fall of arguably the world's first smartphone. With its frenzied pacing, 8-bit game-style score and Johnson sporting a headband in a loose interpretation of tech whizz Douglas Fregin, the film eschewed by-the-numbers biopic tropes for something more off-kilter. Given the chaotic nature of Bourdain's career — especially in the early days of "pirate" cooks and debauchery — we could see a similarly unconventional approach to telling this real-life story.

BOURDAIN HAS INSPIRED PROJECTS BEFORE

Documentary *Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain* was released three years after his death by suicide in 2018. Charting his life as a recovering drug addict, chef, author and TV presenter, the doc received backlash for using AI to deep-fake Bourdain's voice reading aloud emails. In fiction, Bradley Cooper — who played 'Jack' Bourdain in the 2005 sitcom adaptation of *Kitchen Confidential* — starred in 2015's *Burnt* as 'Adam', a gifted but temperamental chef (and recovering drug addict).

THE PRODUCTION IS HEATING UP

Cameras began rolling in Provincetown in May, with locals recruited to appear in the film. As per an open casting call-out, "real restaurant kitchen staff with dynamic, unique personalities" will appear alongside Sessa for this punk chef's origin story. Sometimes too many cooks isn't such a bad thing. **BETH WEBB**

***TONY* DOES NOT YET HAVE A RELEASE DATE**

On A Role

DAMSON IDRIS IS JOSHUA PEARCE

THE LONDON-BORN ACTOR PLAYS A BRITISH ROOKIE RACER IN F1

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

THE DRIVING

Idris had to put his driving skills to the test before he'd even been cast opposite Brad Pitt in the racing actioner. During his audition process in 2023, the actor was sent to the PalmerSport racetrack in Bedford, England to see how he could handle a Formula 3000 car. "I have three older brothers, and my whole life I looked up to them with regards to driving," Idris tells *Empire*. "They had Porsches and [Audi] R8s and BMWs. As soon as I was able to drive, the first thing I did was buy fast cars. Any little bit of money I made from [crime drama show] *Snowfall* would go on a car." This flashy pastime helped Idris master speeds of up to 180 miles per hour while shooting. "Which was insane [compared] to London's 20-mile [per hour] rule," laughs the Peckham native.

Top to bottom: Fast track: rising star Damson Idris as rookie F1 driver Joshua Pearce; Lewis Hamilton lends a hand; UK rapper Dave; Face off: Pearce with mentor Sonny (Brad Pitt).

THE MINDSET

To master the psyche of these rubber-burning pros, Idris paid close attention to driving stuntmen Luciano Bacheta and Craig Dolby in the garage. Over their seven months together he picked up on intricate moments and rituals in their routines, like licking their earpieces to help slide them into their ears quickly. Eventually he developed his own: "I'd take a knee, count to ten and say a little prayer before I got into a car — that became the thing I did every single time." It also helped that Lewis Hamilton, a producer and consultant on the film, was on set everyday. "I look at him today with all of his success, and he still wants to win. He's still hungry — as if he's just started."

THE MENTOR

Joshua is a rising prodigy in the film, with Pitt's retired and troubled racing maverick Sonny reluctantly returning to the game as his coach. "The correlation between Sonny and Joshua, that's Brad Pitt and Damson Idris," he explains. "[I'm] this young actor who's trying to find his way and he's this walking monument that I'm trying to learn from." To strengthen that dynamic, the actors did everything together, from training to working out to travelling between tracks.

THE MUSIC

Idris had become so used to portraying Americans on screen that he had to immerse himself back in British culture to play someone closer to home. "I was listening to a lot of [UK rapper] Dave, who's a good friend of mine," he remembers. This also stretched to other music that reminded him of home. "A lot of Afrobeats like Burna Boy, that's the stuff that was banging in my trailer every day. That really got me into the mind of a young kid from East London trying to prove himself." Sometimes you don't need to drive at 20 miles per hour to feel like you're home.

***F1* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 25 JUNE**

Alamy, Getty Images, Charlotte Hornsby, Imago, Paramount, TikTok/@francescascorsese, Warner Bros.

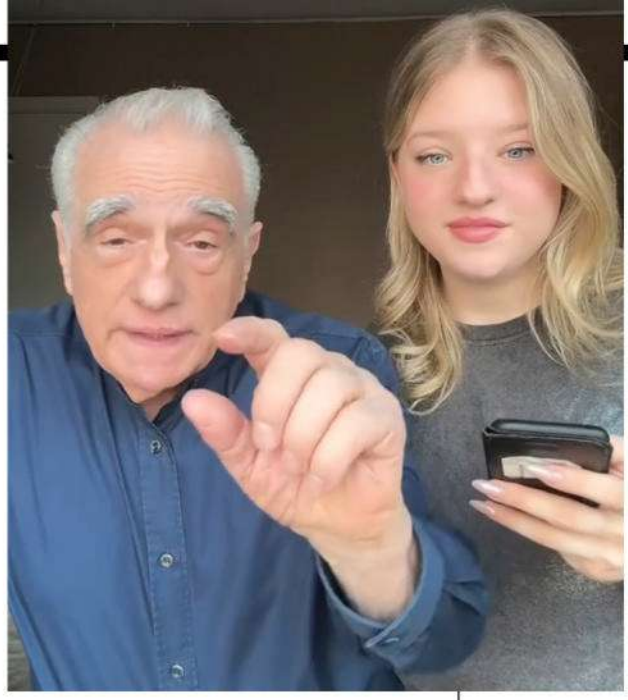
MEET THE NEW SCORSESE

MARTIN'S DAUGHTER FRANCESCA ON FOLLOWING IN HIS FILMMAKING FOOTSTEPS

MARTIN SCORSESE HAD better watch his back: his 25-year-old daughter Francesca — actor, TikTok sensation and proud self-described "nepo baby" — is taking after her father and moving behind the camera. "I've been wanting to make films since I was an infant," she tells *Empire*. "I grew up on film sets, and I never even thought about pursuing anything else."

Scorsese, whose breakout role was in Luca Guadagnino's series *We Are Who We Are*, is both star and executive producer of *Fame And Other Four Letter Words*, a short film following a vapid influencer (*Euphoria*'s Chloe Cherry) who is disconnected from her environmentalist sister (Scorsese). She was drawn to the film's satirical look at social-media obsession ("It was so relevant and current, and I could really relate to it"), especially as someone with a massive online following, and who has to deal with the toxicity that comes with it. "You have so many eyes on you, there are going to be people that just don't like you," she observes. "And that's fine!"

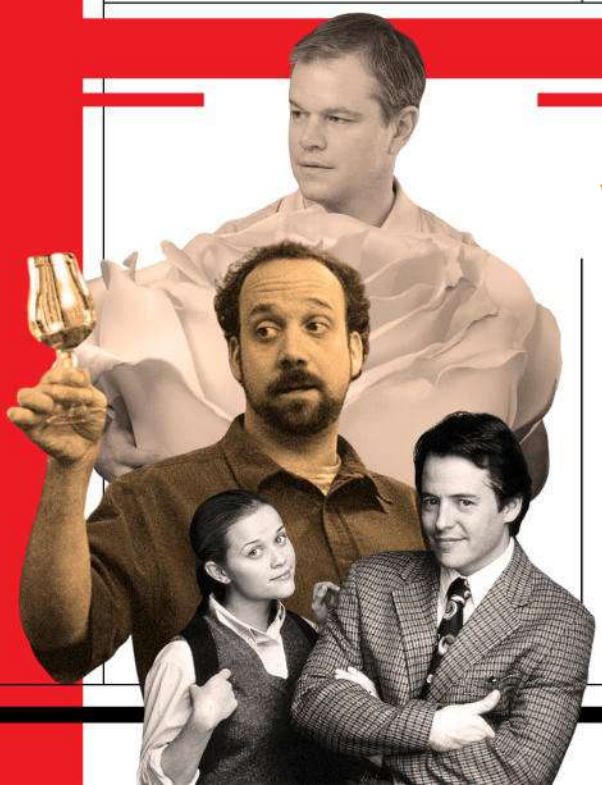
Though Francesca cut her teeth directing short films, it's her TikToks with her dad where she teaches him Gen Z slang like "hits different" and "ick" that have made her internet royalty. "He's *definitely* difficult to direct!" she says. "He directed me in my last video, and he was yelling at me for stepping out of the frame too much. He goes on and on, and I love it."



Top: Francesca has gone viral teaching her dad Gen Z slang on TikTok. **Middle and bottom:** Stepping into the limelight as Maxine Carr in *Fame And Other Four Letter Words*.

As well as seeing her go viral, making online content has helped Scorsese's acting career: "It's definitely gotten me more comfortable in front of the camera," she says, "especially if I'm talking and being vulnerable." She has some on-screen jobs in the pipeline, but her primary goal is directing, with another short in the works that she hopes will become a feature. "Dad, creativity-wise, is definitely my biggest inspiration, in film and in life," she says.

But fear not — she's not quitting TikTok any time soon, as she finds it a mostly joyful place to express herself. "I have a great community on there, and they're just really fun to do," she says of her viral videos. Sounds like this Scorsese hits different. **LAURA VENNING**



PAYNE AND (TV) GAIN

WITH A SMALL-SCREEN ADAPTATION OF *THE HOLDOVERS* INCOMING, WHAT OTHER ALEXANDER PAYNE MOVIES COULD GET THE TELLY TREATMENT?

SIDEWAYS

Rather than a direct adaptation of Payne's gentle, midlife-crisis-themed comedy-drama, a Paul Giamatti and Thomas Haden Church-fronted reality show in which they tour American vineyards *à la The Trip* would go down smoother than a large glass of Pinot Noir. What could be a better pairing with a Merlot than Giamatti nailing an uncanny Michael Caine impression?

DOWNSIZING

The fantastical premise — humans can opt to be shrunk down to miniature size to help combat overpopulation and global warming — is arguably more timely than ever, and ripe for further exploration in the context of modern America. An anthology show that probes into different corners of the tiny world, from the über-wealthy elite to the outer slums' inhabitants, could be fascinating.

ELECTION

Fragile male egos! Headstrong future Republicans! Scandal and sabotage! The themes of this high-school-set political comedy continue to sit firmly in the zeitgeist a quarter-century on. We're picturing Reese Witherspoon's formidable Tracy Flick as the first female POTUS in this serialised sequel, inspiring a new wave of blonde overachievers to take up her teen mantle. **BETH WEBB**

What's in an asterisk?

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE THUNDERBOLTS* TITLE CHANGE ON KEEPING MARVEL'S BIG SECRET

WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

FROM THE START, that asterisk in the title of *Thunderbolts** prompted a big question: why, we all asked, is it there? On 5 May, after the film's robust opening weekend, a second asterisk gave us the answer, with online videos (and the film's finale) revealing that Marvel's messy team of misfits were actually *The New Avengers (or, as David Harbour's Alexei spells it, *The New Avengerz). But while Julia Louis-Dreyfus' slippery assembler Val announced that as a hasty, neck-saving stunt in the movie, director Jake Schreier and the Disney marketing team had long been planning this audacious move, to an almost Thanos-like level of clandestine machination.

"The asterisk was part of my last pitch meeting," Schreier explains to *Empire*. "I said it would be funny if you did an Instagram post where you put an asterisk on the title and said, 'Until we come up with something better.' Kevin [Feige] and Lou [D'Esposito] embraced the idea, because for a movie about not the most famous team of heroes, it adds a level of intrigue that might get people's attention. So it was an endemic part of the film. But I did not expect it to happen on this level!"

That "something better" was unveiled via a global string of stunts, including Schreier and the cast exposing the new logo on social media, a switch-up on Wheaties cereal boxes, and the Winter Soldier himself (Sebastian Stan) pasting a fresh poster on a Hollywood bus shelter. (Although, in case you were wondering, it's been confirmed that *Thunderbolts** remains the official title.)

"It felt like a really fun evolution of the campaign," says Ryan Stankevich, Senior Vice President of Marketing at Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures. "We wanted to acknowledge the storytelling that happened within the movie, and introduce that idea to audiences after the movie's opening weekend." The biggest challenge, she says, came with keeping such a big secret for so long. How did they manage *that*? "We were just really disciplined about when that information was shared and how." Schreier is frankly astonished it didn't get out sooner. "Even when we had these early fan screenings, it didn't spread as quickly as I thought it might," he marvels.

For some, however, the surprises weren't preserved long enough, with accusations that by fuelling renewed interest in the movie with the use of the A-word, the studio spoiled it for anyone who didn't make the opening weekend. "Discourse is a great part of the Marvel fan experience," Stankevich says. "For as many people who complained, we saw a large percentage say they thought it was really clever. Some people also complained we didn't do *The New Avengers with a 'z'! But we welcome healthy debate."

Whatever your feelings, the Flerken's out of the bag, and Schreier couldn't be happier to see his gang of reprobates stinking up Avengers Tower, with all that means for the MCU. "It was in the first draft I read, so I always felt it was

Clockwise from main: It was **The New Avengers* after all; Florence Pugh unveils the new one-sheet; Sebastian Stan approaches the original poster...; ... And gives it an update.

exciting and something to be grappled with," he says. "In that post-credits scene [shot by *Avengers: Doomsday* directors Joe and Anthony Russo], there are hints already that this isn't a perfect fit. As a fan who genuinely does not know what's going to happen in those [Avengers] films, I'm excited to find out along with everyone else." Spoken like someone who *really* knows how to keep a secret.

TIME TO GRIP IT AND RIP IT (AGAIN)

HAPPY GILMORE 2'S DIRECTOR ON WHY THE CLUB-SWINGING HERO IS BACK IN THE BUNKER

A MATTER OF TIMING

It's taken nearly 30 years for Adam Sandler's iconic, rage-fuelled golfer, Happy Gilmore, to return for another round. While the actor is no stranger to sequels, he's taken his time returning to one of the two characters who launched his career and lent their names to his production company, Happy Madison (the other being Billy Madison). "With every passing year, the stakes got higher," says director Kyle Newacheck, who is reuniting with Sandler after crime comedy *Murder Mystery*. "He was waiting until the time was right."

A MODERN MAN

It would have been the easiest thing in the world to simply make a rough copy of the first movie. And while there are plenty of familiar faces (Julie Bowen, Ben Stiller and Christopher McDonald), Newacheck was keen to drive into new territory. "My big approach was trying to make it contemporary," he says. "The first movie was so of its time. I wanted to make it totally what an audience of 2025 expects. People are more sophisticated now. I really was trying to do my part to ground the character of Happy."

BUT NOT A MILDER ONE

That approach, coupled with Sandler's age (he turns 59 this year), might explain why this sequel is aiming for emotion as well as hilarity. "When the characters look back on themselves, they're looking back on 30 years of history," Newacheck says of the film's tone. So, this is an older Happy. A wiser Happy. A calmer Happy? After all, the film's trailer is notably free of any of the meltdowns that became Gilmore's trademark. Has he mellowed in his old age? "I would never say there's no rage in Gilmore. When you have that much rage in you in 1996, it doesn't go away."

Top to bottom: Adam Sandler takes a swing at returning to his role as Happy Gilmore; Sandler on set with director Kyle Newacheck.

AN ALL-STAR DREAM TEAM

When *Happy Gilmore* came out, it was something of a punk comedy about an outsider gatecrashing golf's snootosphere. But today's generation of golfers have pretty much all grown up on it, which meant the likes of Rory McIlroy and Bryson DeChambeau were queuing up for cameos. Oh, and John Daly, the wild man of golf and perhaps the closest the sport has come to an actual Happy, plays Happy's mentor. "I had the most fun with those guys," says Newacheck. "I found it exhilarating to see what kind of acting chops they have." Could Rory McIlroy get a little gold statue to go with his Green Jacket? **CHRIS HEWITT**

***HAPPY GILMORE 2* IS ON NETFLIX FROM JULY 25**

Auteurs assemble!

RICHARD LINKLATER ON BRINGING LEGENDARY DIRECTORS BACK TO LIFE FOR NOUVELLE VAGUE

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

RICHARD LINKLATER WAS in his twenties when his dad first took him to see *Breathless* (*À Bout De Souffle*), Jean-Luc Godard's groundbreaking film of the French New Wave. "I didn't totally get it," he recalls. "It was the next time I saw it, a few months later, [that] I saw the radicalness of it." Now, the filmmaker has made *Nouvelle Vague*, a fictionalised account of how Godard's debut revolutionised cinema. In Cannes, the day after its world premiere, Linklater tells *Empire* about his homage to these cinema-changing icons.

GUILLAUME MARBECK AS JEAN-LUC GODARD

Godard is the hero of *Nouvelle Vague*. In 1959, he was still a critic at French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, bursting with creative drive and desperate to make the leap into filmmaking. Linklater needed an actor with almost arrogant self-assurance. He found it in Guillaume Marbeck (like most of the cast, a relative unknown). "I met other guys, but they didn't have Guillaume's swagger," says Linklater. "You need that revolutionary passion to make your first film — you're kind of full of shit by definition. You don't have experience — you just have confidence. I know that so well from my first couple films." Marbeck perfected Godard's accent, and his nonchalant sunglasses-and-chain-smoking mien. "That's half the battle, if you can get the shades and the voice right," says Linklater. Even real-life Godard associates were convinced: "We had visitors on set who worked with Godard," he recalls. "Not from this era, but they knew him. They were like: 'That's him.'"

ADRIEN ROUYARD AS FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT

Truffaut — who co-wrote the treatment for *Breathless* with Claude Chabrol — appears as collaborator, friendly rival and motivator for Godard in the film; Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* sparks such envy in Godard that he urgently moves to make his own debut. "Godard is jealous of Truffaut because he has that enormous success," says Linklater. "He's ahead of the game. He's younger. But they're good friends. That's why I wanted to end the film with his arm around him." When Linklater found actor Adrien Rouyard, he "had it right there", he says, gesturing to his face. (The resemblance, it's fair to say, is uncanny.)

LAURENT MOTHE AS ROBERTO ROSSELLINI

Something of a father figure to the radical young French auteurs was Italian director Roberto Rossellini, who in the film offers an inspiring speech to Godard and his peers — including Agnès Varda, Jacques Demy and Eric Rohmer. "He's the guy they all looked up to," says Linklater. The scene, where future legends gather to hear Rossellini share his wisdom, was emotional, he remembers. "They walked in the room, and my assistant director said, 'Okay, now we have Miss Varda and Jacques Demy.' The room would just get quiet. I was tearing up." Whether it actually happened is debatable: "That moment's a little more hyperbolised," Linklater admits, "but the spirit of it is clearly real. [Rossellini] was in Paris a lot in those days." Linklater's script is drawn from extensive research — the film has been gestating for over a decade — and uses verbatim quotes from the filmmakers. "I think it's 96 per cent research," he says. "The quotes are real. Everything's pretty documented." It is Rossellini who offers this aphorism to Godard: "First day of shoot: end of dream!"

Top to bottom: The new New Wave — Godard (Guillaume Marbeck), Seberg (Zoey Deutch) and Belmondo (Aubry Dullin); Truffaut (Adrien Rouyard); Rossellini (Laurent Mothe).

***NOUVELLE VAGUE* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

Alamy, Disney, Getty Images, Universal

THE MONTHLY MIXTAPE

EMPIRE MIXMASTER AMON WARMANN SELECTS THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL TUNES

'MAIN TITLES'
MAX ARUJ & ALFIE GODFREY

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING

Lalo Schifrin's iconic, tense theme gets a brass-heavy revival with an ominous and percussive final flourish.

'THE BIX IS BACK'
NICHOLAS BRITELL

ANDOR: SEASON 2, EPISODE 6

Adria Arjona's vengeful Bix gets a big cheer-worthy moment in the *Star Wars* spin-off's second chapter. Brittell imbues it with a triumphant, drum-laden rendition of the main theme. Glorious.

'IT'S SO HARD TO SAY GOODBYE TO YESTERDAY'
BOYZ II MEN

M3GAN 2.0 TRAILER

This sombre R&B classic scores a violent montage of M3GAN-enforced murder to hilarious effect. An unserious homage to this famous bad bot.

'IT'S BUCKY!'
SON LUX

THUNDERBOLTS*

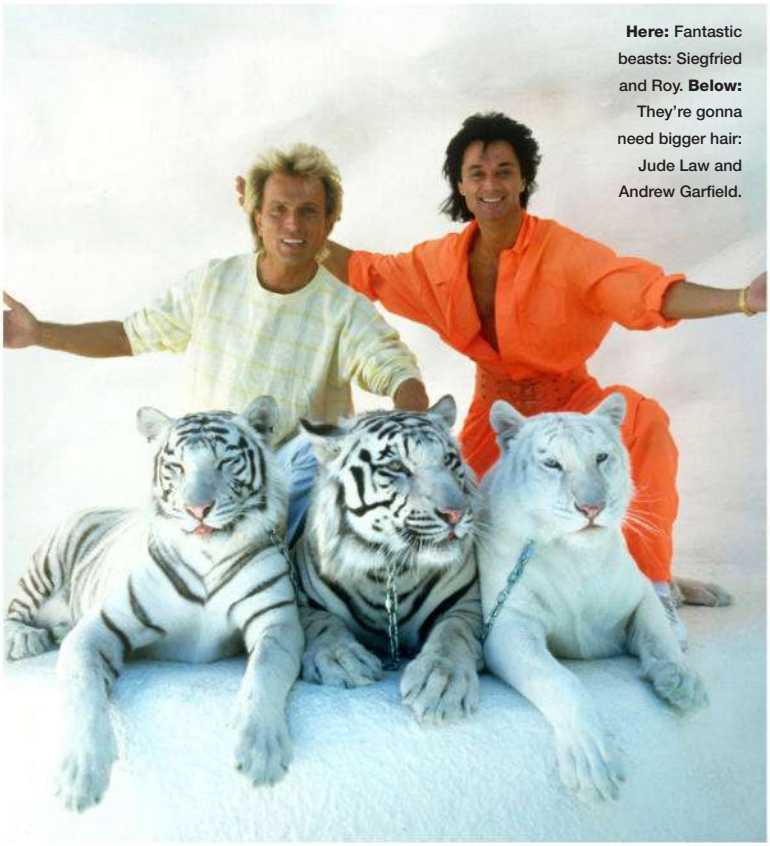
The epic entrance to Sebastian Stan's super soldier is bolstered by his very first heroic theme. Escalating strings and a thunderous brass section welcome this New Avenger splendidly.

'THE BIG PAYBACK'
JAMES BROWN

HIGHEST 2 LOWEST TRAILER

Confidence radiates from this first look at Spike Lee and Denzel Washington's neo-noir Kurosawa reinterpretation. It's perfectly soundtracked by this swaggering, upbeat slice of funk.

LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE *EMPIRE* SPOTIFY ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE



Here: Fantastic beasts: Siegfried and Roy. **Below:** They're gonna need bigger hair: Jude Law and Andrew Garfield.

BIG CATS, BIGGER DRAMA

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM WILD THINGS, THE UNBELIEVABLE TALE OF SIEGFRIED & ROY

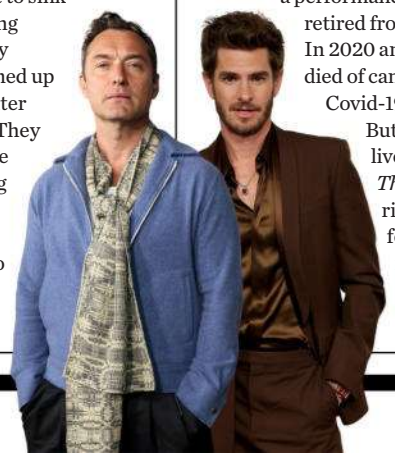
LAS VEGAS HAS hosted some eye-popping entertainment. David Copperfield teleported objects. Evel Knievel jumped the fountains at Caesars Palace. Liberace rocked pianos. But there were two men who brought flamboyant thunder to Sin City like nobody else: Siegfried Fischbacher and Roy Horn, the German duo who dared to throw deadly jungle animals into their magic act, becoming world-famous as a result. No wonder Jude Law and Andrew Garfield have signed on to play them in an upcoming Apple TV+ series, *Wild Things*: their story is so outrageous, it makes *Tiger King* look like Ken Loach.

With the pilot episode set to be directed by *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*' Matt Shakman, it's bound to have blockbuster production values. And there's a *lot* of red meat to sink its teeth into. Everything about Siegfried and Roy seems like it was dreamed up by a feverish screenwriter after a visit to the zoo. They met on a German cruise ship in 1959, Roy asking Siegfried, "If you can make a rabbit disappear, could you do the same thing with a cheetah?" Siegfried nodded, and an act was born. The pair headed to Vegas, learning English by watching *The Flintstones*, and were given a break by gangster Frank 'Lefty' Rosenthal, the inspiration for Robert De Niro's character in *Casino*. From there, they got bigger and bigger, purchasing dozens of white tigers and lions —beasts with names like Passion and Destiny — with which to perform their illusions. They wore jewelled capes and large codpieces. At their mansion, The Jungle Palace, a huge mural featured a nude Siegfried, holding two cheetahs on chains. Michael Jackson wrote their theme tune.

"Sleeping with lions and tigers means you don't need many pillows," Roy mused in 2000. "Their bellies are just as comfortable." Three years later, he was mauled by a tiger during a performance, and they retired from show business. In 2020 and 2021, they died of cancer (Roy) and Covid-19 (Siegfried).

But their legend lives on: if *Wild Things* does its job right, prepare for paws, claws, roars and dropping jaws.

NICK DE SEMLYEN



Making a horror that goes harder

WEAPONS' WRITER-DIRECTOR ZACH CREGGER ON HIS RULE-BREAKING FOLLOW-UP TO *BARBARIAN*

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

IN 2022, WRITER-DIRECTOR Zach Cregger's *Barbarian* — which saw a woman get more than she bargained for from her double-booked Airbnb — was a word-of-mouth hit packed with twists and turns that crept up from nowhere and surprised and delighted horror fans. Cregger returns with the mysterious *Weapons,* in which almost every child from elementary school teacher Justine Gandy's (Julia Garner) class goes missing at the same time one night. It is, Cregger tells *Empire*, a more "creatively ambitious" movie, and "a lot bigger and weirder than *Barbarian*". Strap in, folks — here, he explains how.

LETTING IT RIP

Cregger didn't intentionally set out to make *Weapons* a more ambitious film. It instead came from a very personal place, when a very close friend unexpectedly died during post-production on *Barbarian*. "I was devastated," the director says. "It put me in such a raw, emotional state that I was able to sit down and just write, from a place of pure catharsis, without any idea of what it was going to be. I didn't have any regard for difficulty, or production challenges that would come. I was just writing to get this feeling out. I just let it rip." The result is a much more inward-facing film. "*Barbarian* was an exploration of social themes; [it] was me looking at the world around me," Cregger explains. "This is more an exploration of my own personal shit, for lack of a better word. *Weapons* is me looking within, and working on myself." Despite that, Cregger is keen to stress, this is a film designed to entertain. "[It's] a fun movie," he says. "It's funny, it's scary, it's inviting. It's not a grim, morose slog. And yet the story it tells is really fucked up." If *Barbarian* is anything to go by, we're in for a wild ride.

Top to bottom: Ghoul school; Julia Garner plays teacher Justine Gandy; Sleepwalking: all but one of the kids in Justine's class go missing on the same night.

HARNESSING STAR POWER

Weapons sees Cregger working with some big names, including soon-to-be Silver Surfer Garner, Alden Ehrenreich (who plays a local police officer), and Josh Brolin as Archer, a father of one of the missing. "I remember on the first

Left, top to bottom: Writer-director Zach Cregger (right) with Josh Brolin; Brolin plays the father of one of the missing kids.

day," Cregger says, "when [Brolin] stepped in front of the camera, I was like, 'Holy shit! That's a fucking movie star. I am playing with a whole new deck of cards right now.'" Brolin and co weren't the original line-up, though (Pedro Pascal and Renate Reinsve were originally intended to lead the film). "I had cast this movie almost a year before we ended up shooting it, with a completely different cast," Cregger recalls. "I had scheduling mishaps, then there was a strike, and I lost almost my entire cast. It was a really tumultuous process." It all worked out, in the end. "There is not a weak link in this movie," he says. "There are seven main characters and they all do their job."

CAUSING A PRE-RELEASE STIR

Distributor New Line Cinema, which snapped up the film after a competitive bidding war, has taken a distinct approach to teasing its arrival. In a move reminiscent of *The Blair Witch Project* (which had audiences believing its marketing footage was real) and last year's *Longlegs* (which dropped multiple disturbing images and short teasers), the *Weapons* trailer release was preceded by an image showing only an alarm clock reading 2:17am (the time the children leave their homes) and the launch of maybrookmissing.net, an old-school website featuring creepy security-camera footage of the kids running, arms outstretched. It's gotten the internet well and truly hyped — but was something Cregger had to see to believe. "When they were pitching the marketing to me, I was suspicious," he admits. "I was like, 'Are we trying to fool people?' Because people get upset when they realise it's just a movie and not a freak occurrence. But once they did it, and people really responded, I couldn't be happier. It's super-cool." With all that excitement behind it, *Weapons* is ready to launch.

***WEAPONS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 AUGUST**

Marco Vittur, Warner Bros.

THE PLATFORM

"*Sinners* is everything that Hollywood wants more of. Yet it was labelled a risk"

AMON WARMANN ON THE FRUSTRATING DOUBLE STANDARDS APPLIED TO THE TRAILBLAZING MOVIE

RYAN COOGLER'S *SINNERS* is an unprecedented success story. The original, R-rated, genre-fluid picture — starring Coogler's muse and frequent collaborator Michael B. Jordan, and a host of Black stars — has (at the time of writing) grossed $242 million in North America and $320 million globally, against a $90 million budget. It scored the biggest opening weekend for an original film since *Us* in 2019. Reviews about the '30s-set vampire movie have been glowing and word-of-mouth buzz only growing louder. Meanwhile, social media has lit up with discussions about the film's themes and technical brilliance. It's everything that Hollywood says it wants more of — an ambitious, big swing of a movie that isn't a sequel or connected to any IP.

And yet, early reporting on the film seemed more sceptical than celebratory. Coogler and his film were labelled as a "risk", a "gamble". When *Sinners* defied those expectations with a $61 million opening-weekend haul, its triumph was immediately downgraded with an asterisk (and not the fun *Thunderbolts** kind), with *Variety* noting that "the Warner Bros. release has a $90 million price tag before global marketing expenses, so profitability remains a ways away". In 2025, some professional prognosticators even regurgitated the oft-disproven myth that films steeped in Black culture don't travel.

Coogler's entire filmography flies in the face of that notion. Since he burst onto the scene with *Fruitvale Station* in 2013, the writer-director has maintained an impressive track record of commercial and critical hits. With his first five films — all of which feel personal and culturally precise while having universal themes — he has amassed over $2 billion at the box office, a run that's comparable to the start of Steven Spielberg's career. Objectively, it's a record that proves that Coogler is one of the safest bets in Hollywood today. Yet Spielberg, Christopher Nolan and others haven't had to put up with the constant questions and doubts that Coogler has. The double standards and thinly veiled racism could not be clearer.

In the wake of the *Sinners* discourse, it will be intriguing to see what type of energy the next original release by a Black filmmaker will bring. The talent behind the highly anticipated *Highest 2 Lowest* may mean that any asterisks remain untyped, but not everyone has Spike Lee and Denzel Washington's pedigree. For filmmakers known and yet to be discovered, this could mark a welcome shift that sees their achievements be lauded rather than demeaned. Cynics need not apply.

The Spotlight

Britain Dalton, Trinity Bliss, Jack Champion & Bailey Bass

THE *AVATAR* STARS ON GROWING UP BLUE AND APPROACHING THEIR MOST CHALLENGING CHAPTER YET

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

SAM McGUIRE

WHEN JAMES CAMERON took us back to Pandora with *Avatar: The Way Of Water* in 2022, he not only returned heroic Na'vi couple Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña) to our screens, but introduced us to their young, extended family too. They include Sully siblings Lo'ak (Britain Dalton) and Tuktirey (Trinity Bliss), plus adopted human brother Spider (Jack Champion), and Tsireya (Bailey Bass) of the water-based Metkayina Clan. After an extensive audition process, Dalton, Bliss, Champion and Bass spent years shooting *The Way Of Water* and upcoming third film *Fire And Ash* concurrently, in roles that defined their childhoods and launched their careers. *Empire* sits down with the quartet to dive deep into their *Avatar* journey.

THE FIRST WATCH

Avatar arrived in December 2009, when Dalton (who hails from California), Bass (Nashville), Champion (Virginia) and Bliss (Los Angeles) were aged eight, six, five, and just one month, respectively. Young as he was, this big blue behemoth still managed to seep into Champion's cinematic consciousness. "I have a vivid memory of watching it with my mom," he says. "I remember thinking, 'They have to make a sequel to this, right?' And lo and behold..." For the others, their debut trip to Pandora came during the casting process for *The Way Of Water* — in Bliss' case, it was actually on the way to

Left to right: Britain Dalton, Trinity Bliss, Jack Champion and Bailey Bass, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 28 April 2025.

Britain Dalton: Grooming: Kelly Shew. Solo shot: Britain's own. Group shot: Tank, socks, braces: Britain's own; Trousers: COS; Shoes: Aldo. Trinity Bliss: Styling: Enrique Melendez. Hair: Clayton Hawkins. Make-up: Stacey Hummell. Dress: Maje; Shoes: Alexandra Birman; Jewellery: Lady Grey, Jack Champion: Styling: Amanda Lim & Luca Kingston. Grooming: Michael Duenas. Solo shot: Jacket, jeans and T-shirt: Fear Of God; Trainers: Converse; Jewellery: Pyrrha. Group shot: Shirt and trousers: Into Dusk; Shoes: Scarosso; Jewellery: Rat Betty, Bailey Bass: Hair: Cassandra Normil at THE VISIONARIES using AMIKA. Make-Up: Tori McConkey using Merit Beauty at The Wall Group. Styling: Andrew Gelwicks for The Only Agency. Solo look: Dress: Francesca Miranda; Shoes: Stylist's own; Earrings and rings: Lady Grey, Ritique. Group shot: Shorts suit: Tae Park; Shoes: Stylist's own, Earrings: GuitaM; Necklace: Ritique; Rings: Lady Grey. Joanna Laura Constantine, Heli Rocks.

auditions. "It was a two-hour drive with LA traffic," she says. "I'd watch *Avatar* there and back and prepare myself, mimicking Neytiri." She wasn't the only one who gained early inspiration from Saldaña's Na'vi matriarch. "I was like, 'Holy cow,'" Bass, who also starred in TV's *Interview With The Vampire*, says of her first time seeing the film. "I had a feeling who Tsireya was going to be, and her similarity to Neytiri, and thought, 'That is what I get to emulate.'" Dalton didn't catch up until after landing the role, but it provided pivotal context for what was coming. "It blew my mind," he says, "and put into perspective how big a thing I was in."

MAKING THE MOVIES

In Dalton's words, all four actors "grew up on set". "It's a weird way to spend your childhood," he continues, "but Pandora is sort of a second home to us." Fifteen-year-old Bliss is the youngest of the bunch, and has distinct memories of watching her castmates get older throughout the shoot. "I remember we all started as kids, and we'd all be in set school together," she recalls. "Slowly, everybody started growing up, and now I'm the only one." Bliss ›

Below, top to bottom: Spider (Jack Champion), Lo'ak (Britain Dalton), Tuk (Trinity Bliss) and Kiri (Sigourney Weaver) in *The Way Of Water*; The young cast on set of *Fire And Ash* with director James Cameron.

did get a hand with her homework, though, from incoming *Fire And Ash* star Oona Chaplin, who plays head of the Ash People Varang. "She helped with my diagram for school," Bliss says. "She'd bring her ukulele and I'd have my guitar and we'd be outside her trailer, jamming together." Champion was on set twice as long as his castmates, shooting his scenes once with them on the Volume stage, and again alone on location in New Zealand. "When it ended, I went back to my hometown [Blacksburg], and it was crazy," he says. "It's hard to re-find yourself again when you get back to civilian life." Despite working on one of the biggest franchises in history, they're taking it all in their stride. "I feel like I forget," Bass says of her unique childhood, "and then I tell people casually, because it's our lives. I think we all do a good job, especially with our parents, of making sure it doesn't get to our heads."

NEXT ON SCREEN

Neteyam's (Jamie Flatters) death in *The Way Of Water* will hit all the young characters hard — especially Dalton's Lo'ak, now the oldest remaining Sully child in *Fire And Ash*. "[Lo'ak] was born to be a leader," Dalton says. "But he's never been given the trust. When Neteyam dies... that's no way that he ever imagined being finally able to be seen. He blames himself." Those shockwaves ripple down to Bliss' Tuktirey, the baby of the family, too. "[*The Way Of Water*] was quite a coming of age for Tuk," she says. "I don't think she'll ever be the same. It's the first time she's experienced a death in her life. She's still her small and mighty self, and maybe she'll move up the Sully ranks." As for Spider, after deciding to rescue the Na'vi version of his father, Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang), but ultimately return to the Sullys, the third film sees him caught between two worlds. "He feels very conflicted," says Champion. "His 'dad' is reborn into this Na'vi form and still as evil as ever, if not more so, and he still felt he had to save him. You see that guilt play out, and the evolution of Spider trying to figure out where he belongs." Bass' Tsireya, as a member of the Metkayina Clan but close ally of the Omatikaya Sullys, will also learn to balance two sides of herself. "That bond [with the Sullys] continues to grow," she explains, "and Tsireya has this turmoil between what's right and standing up for people versus what you're taught your entire life."

BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STARS' FAVOURITE STUFF

THE PODCAST
RELATABLES
"I was listening to it last semester. It's these Australian boys and they just talk about what girls hate about boys, and try to give girls advice on what works on guys. It's kind of fire."
BAILEY BASS

THE BOOK
INVINCIBLE
BY ROBERT KIRKMAN
"This is not because [Season 3 of the TV adaptation] just came out. I read the entire three or four comic compendiums before the second season, and I love it dearly."
JACK CHAMPION

THE TV SHOW
THE LAST OF US
"I haven't always been the biggest horror person — I was a scaredy-cat for quite a long time. But I got so invested in these characters and making sure they're going to be alright. Episode 1 and 2 [of Season 2] had me in shambles."
TRINITY BLISS

THE CARTOON
DANNY PHANTOM
"I like classic kid cartoons. I like horror, anything dark, and I like the gothic style. It was really cool and edgy for its time."
BRITAIN DALTON

Below, top to bottom: *The Way Of Water*: Tuk (Trinity Bliss), Tsireya (Bailey Bass) plus ilu; Magic hour; Dalton and Bass making *Fire And Ash*.

BEYOND PANDORA

There may be (at least) two more Avatar movies to come after *Fire And Ash*, but the young stars have no shortage of ambition for the future once they're done. Champion is keen to focus on his acting career — also on his CV are *Scream VI* and *Freaky Tales* — as well as screenwriting ("I'm not great yet, but I want to learn how"). He also has one specific type of movie in his sights: "As an actor, I feel like I was born to do a Western." Bliss also wants to pursue acting, as well as music — right after she finishes high school. Dalton has plans to develop his own films, and says he'd "love to start my own animal shelter". And Bass, as well as climate activism and studying at Columbia University, wants to follow in the footsteps of a key mentor from her time on *Avatar*, the late Jon Landau. "I want to really emulate what Jon's done in terms of producing," she says. "Jon had impact, and he was never a douchebag. That's the biggest thing I'm going to take away." As words to live by, it's up there with, "I see you."

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER**

Smells like screen spirit

HOW A RISING NUMBER OF YOUNG CLASSIC-MOVIE LOVERS ARE KEEPING CINEMAS ALIVE

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

DURING A 2021 screening of Michael Mann's *Manhunter* at London's Prince Charles Cinema, head programmer Paul Vickery looked out across the audience. The film, which had played many times at the venue, would usually pull in a typical repertory or 'rep' audience (cinemagoers who favour classic or cult movies). "Of which I would be a representative as an old white man," laughs Vickery, who's in his forties. Yet this time he was stunned to find that almost all of the crowd consisted of people in their early twenties.

And they kept on coming. Today the cinema's matinée screenings, which used to draw in smaller numbers, now rake in between 100 to 200 largely Gen Z patrons daily. Weekly screenings of Wong Kar Wai's 2000 romance *In The Mood For Love* often sell out, as do semi-regular screenings of early auteur films like *Eraserhead* and *After Hours*. "Young people are propping up the Prince Charles Cinema at the moment, with regards to our box office," Vickery concludes.

It's happening across the UK as well. Last year, under-25-years-olds made up 32 per cent of classic-movie ticket sales at Oxford's Ultimate Picture Palace. That may not be PCC numbers — the UPP also has just one screen and also plays new releases — but head of programming Tom Jowett maintains that this figure was much smaller pre-Covid. He's also seen appetites among the demographic broadening, citing *Seven Samurai* and *Beau Travail* as big hitters. "I'm so impressed that a 16- or 17-year-old will sit through a two-and-a-half-hour Kurosawa movie," he marvels.

Covid has played a crucial role in the shift. From the confines of lockdown, budding film fans clocked up hours of viewing while interacting through online platforms like Letterboxd. "It has quite a lot of clout; people like to log what they've watched and [for example] my son follows Mike Flanagan on there and can see what he's watched," says Picturehouse's director of programming, Carol McKay. Through these web communities, cinephilia feels more accessible. "Everybody's [become] really supportive about the journey of discovering cinema, whereas historically it's been a bit of an elitist boys-only club," Vickery explains.

No wonder then that, when cinemas gradually began to reopen, young people flocked to see their new favourite filmmakers on a big screen. The buzzy *Manhunter* screening in October 2021 happened on the very day that the PCC removed socially distanced seating. The UPP, noticing the change, trialled free membership and affordable tickets to their new customers with hugely successful results.

Top to bottom: Enjoying David Lynch's *Eraserhead* on the big screen; Wong Kar Wai's *In The Mood For Love*; Griffin Dunne and Rosanna Arquette in *After Hours*.

The venues are confident this is bigger than a trend. "I see them as 'cinema for life' audiences," says Jowett. "You can't, as a 17-year-old, go to watch *Seven Samurai* and not be incredibly passionate about seeing things on the big screen. I see it as building a sustainable future for the cinema." The kids are alright, and thanks to their newfound movie love, the big screen hopefully will be too.

A CANNES LEGEND PUSHES HER LIMITS

JULIA DUCOURNAU FOLLOWS HER PALME D'OR WIN WITH HER MOST PERSONAL FILM YET, ALPHA

AS A YOUNG filmmaker, Julia Ducournau dreamed of one day bringing bold, transgressive visions to the Cannes Film Festival. "When I was a kid, you didn't always see horror or sci-fi in this sort of [festival]," she tells *Empire*. "I always thought it was a great challenge to bring genre to this competition." The French filmmaker has ultimately debuted all three of her feature films at the festival, including 2016's carnal-cannibal chiller *Raw* and 2021's wildly provocative body-horror *Titane* — in which, among other things, a character has sex with a car. The latter defied the odds to win the Palme d'Or, Cannes' top prize. This year, she returned again with her new film, *Alpha*.

It's a different tack for the filmmaker. *Raw* and *Titane* were "completely genre", she says, sitting atop a hotel roof on the Croisette. "I don't consider *Alpha* a genre movie. I consider it a drama. But I use elements of genre, or unrealistic iconography." Toggling between the 1980s and 1990, it's in part an AIDS allegory for which the filmmaker says she "drew from a lot of my private life". The film tells the story of 13-year-old Alpha (Mélissa Boros), her doctor mother (Golshifteh Farahani) and drug-addict uncle (Tahar Rahim), living in the midst of

a mysterious and misunderstood bloodborne virus which slowly turns its victims into marble-like rock statues.

"I wanted to make my characters beautiful," says Ducournau on the striking visuals, the "unrealistic iconography" she refers to. "I thought that this cohabitation of death and life within one person was the closest I could get to symbolising the fear of death. I also wanted to make the monuments for all those that we lost at the time. There is something sacred about it."

Unlike the extreme, outlandish horror of her first two films, *Alpha* is bringing a different energy for the filmmaker, demonstrating a more emotional, vulnerable side. "It's a process of digging deeper, challenging myself how much I can expose myself with emotions," she says. "My first films were not very talkative, because, as you know, I work with sensation a lot." The subject matter for Alpha required another approach — addressing the pain of the AIDS crisis more directly. "The film is about trauma and how it's passed on through generations. That trauma hasn't been resolved, it hasn't been mourned. We needed to [say] the unsaid." As her past films did before it, Ducournau hopes *Alpha* will make a lot of noise. **JOHN NUGENT**

Left: Mélissa Boros and Tahar Rahim. **Below left:** Director Julia Ducournau on set with Boros.

***ALPHA* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

CHRIS HEWITT IS THINKING ABOUT... THE RETURN OF THE NO-FRILLS ACTIONER

Den Of Thieves 2, *The Accountant 2* and *HAVOC* all coming out in the UK on the same day made me realise that we might be in a golden period of handsomely mounted, character-driven action flicks. This action-movie junkie is in hog heaven.

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... PEAK PEDRO

Every screen that I have sat down in front of over the past month has had Pedro Pascal on it. I look in a baby's pram and there's Pedro Pascal. I open the curtains and Pedro Pascal is in the sun. Just flick through this issue. Pedro Pascals everywhere. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

JOHN NUGENT IS THINKING ABOUT... POPE MOVIES

Since the death of Pope Francis, papal-pictures like *Conclave* and *The Two Popes* have exploded in pope-ularity. Is this the next blockbuster craze? Could a Catholic Cinematic Universe soon loom? Cardinal-comedies, Vatican-vampires, Roman Catholic romcoms... Pass the pope-corn bucket.

Alamy, Getty Images, Marco Vittur

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Jack Quaid

THE ACTOR LOVES WATCHING *FLIGHT OF THE CONCHORDS*. JUST NOT ON A PLANE

WORDS **IANA MURRAY**

ARNO

What was your first role in a school play?
It was Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it was the best possible first role in a play. It made me fall in love with acting because I was playing an actor who's so full of himself that he gets turned into a donkey. It was my first time where I got a laugh on stage for a line delivery, and that was huge.

If you could time-travel, when and where would you go?
I probably wouldn't go into the future because it's not looking great at the moment. Let's go with New Orleans when jazz was really starting to take off. It would just be fun to go and see live music in New Orleans at that time.

What's your favourite type of crisp?
I'm in Toronto right now, and they have these things called Ketchup Chips, and they are incredible. Once I start, I can't stop eating them.

Who's the best Tom: Cruise or Hanks?
They're both such different Toms. I guess I have a soft spot for Hanks, just in terms of the sheer variety of roles that he's been able to play over the years. But then that feels so disrespectful to Tom Cruise, who literally puts his life on the line for everything he does! But gun to my head, I gotta go with Hanks.

How much is a pint of milk?
An average beer is maybe $9. That's on the more expensive end. What is the price of milk? It's gotta be less than that, right? I'll even it out, I'll say, like, $4. (*On hearing the actual price*) Oh, God. You've asked me this question at the worst time financially! I way overshot it.

Do you have an irrational fear?
I feel like most of my fears are. I have an irrational fear of flying, and I have to do it a lot in my life. Lately it's been really tough because there's been so many horrible things happening in the sky. But it is irrational: I know it's very safe. There's this website where you put in your flight information, and it will tell you exactly what the turbulence forecast is. So there are things that you can do to track it, but I'm almost too afraid to do that because what if I have to take this plane and it's gonna be one of the worst flights ever?

What's one thing you do better than anyone you know?
Whenever there's a song playing at a restaurant over the speakers, I feel like I'm a human Shazam. I'm usually pretty good at identifying what the song is. I feel like that's my hidden talent. You never want to be the person extending their arm in a room with the Shazam app open.

Can you play a musical instrument?
I can play guitar and piano. I write these really dumb comedy songs, and whenever I can, I've been going around to either a comedy club or a music club and doing a set there. I wanted to get more comfortable in front of a crowd.

Whose poster did you have on your wall as a kid?
As a kid, I didn't really have posters on walls. But in college it was *Flight Of The Conchords*. This is probably the origin of my musical comedy. That show, their live HBO special; they were so influential to me. They're so good and so talented and so funny.

What is the worst smell in the world?
I shot a movie called *Companion* and there was a horrible smell emanating from somewhere. It kept getting worse every day. It's actually very sad. There was a fence around the property where we were shooting and a deer had gotten stuck in it and just died, and we were smelling it decomposing. But now, if anyone is ever hiding a dead body somewhere, I'll be able to notice because I will never forget the smell.

What's your most embarrassing movie blind spot?
There's this movie from Albert Brooks that everyone in my life recommends, *Defending Your Life*. And I still haven't seen it. Not for any reason; it's just one of those things that there's so much to watch and I never get around to it.

What would you like to have written on your tombstone?
I'm just trying to think of what would be the funniest thing... "He tried."

HEADS OF STATE **IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 2 JULY**

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

5 JUNE - 2 JULY 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

Fight-*and*-flight response: Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise).

Top to bottom: Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg) finds some enlightening tech; Peak Hunt; Tech support Luther Stickell (Ving Rhames).

WATCH FIRST

The 1964 Sidney Lumet-directed thriller *Fail Safe* shares some similarities with *Final Reckoning*: both are Cold War-era films in which the world is on the brink of nuclear armageddon.

FILM

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING

HAS TOM CRUISE FINALLY RUN OUT OF THINGS TO FALL OFF?

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **170 MINS**

DIRECTOR Christopher McQuarrie
CAST Tom Cruise, Hayley Atwell, Ving Rhames, Simon Pegg, Henry Czerny, Angela Bassett

PLOT The parasitic AI known as the Entity has infected global cyberspace and threatens the entire human race. The only man who can stop it? IMF agent Ethan Hunt (Cruise).

HAS THE FUSE finally been unlit? After 30 years of saving the world with stunts, set-pieces, spycraft and a substantial amount of sprinting, is Tom Cruise's possibility-defying IMF agent Ethan Hunt finally hanging up his prosthetic mask? Whether or not *Final Reckoning* is truly the final *Mission: Impossible* remains to be seen. But there is a sense of an ending here, a much-deserved victory-lap for this most consistently thrilling of franchises.

It is, to some extent, 'Mission: Impossible — The Greatest Hits'. It opens with a valedictorian montage of all seven previous films, makes a nice narrative link to *Mission: Impossible III*, and even offers a scene which plays out like the *Seinfeld* finale, Ethan's lifetime of crimes and misdemeanours put on trial. Hapless analyst William Donloe (Rolf Saxon), a minor character from the first film, makes a welcome return here too, the resolution of an arc established in 1996 with the line of dialogue, "I want him manning a radar tower in Alaska by the end of the day!"

As much as it nods to the series as a whole, however, this is first and foremost a direct sequel to 2023's *Dead Reckoning*, which first established the sentient AI a-hole the Entity as the ultimate cyber-baddie. Writer-director Christopher McQuarrie — the series' longest-serving steward — ups the ante here in terms of bold narrative ambition. Picking up months later, the world has now irrevocably changed: governments have collapsed, nuclear arsenals have been compromised, societal order has crumbled. And only one man can save us.

Where the earlier films felt like tightly wound, ground-level espionage thrills, this is storytelling on a vast scale. It is essentially a war film, and a Cold War-era one at that, with the Entity forcing superpowers into military brinkmanship, and CIA head-turned-President Erika Sloane (Angela Bassett, more regal than ever) forced into sweaty, unthinkable choices, the trolley problem on a global scale. It sets the grandest, most apocalyptic stakes in a *Mission* film yet, with nothing less than "the total annihilation of humankind" on the table. From a less capable filmmaker, that could feel silly or over-the-top, and though the opening act of this lengthy film — a touch under three hours — initially creaks under the weight of its set-up and exposition, you always feel in safe hands.

Tense, dense, and stressful, it's hardly the feel-good hit of the summer. But it speaks to McQuarrie's fascinations across his now four *Mission* films — his ability to paint on both a colossal canvas and an intimate character one. Our lives, as Henry Czerny's Kittridge says in the first film, and as Ving Rhames' Luther repeats in this one, are the sum of our choices, and much of *Final Reckoning* is about understanding Hunt's choices across his life, all apparently culminating here. He is a man dedicated to saving the world at whatever cost, yes, but he is also dedicated to his friends, to his decency.

That focus means that, unusually, this is a *Mission* film which is largely action-light, at least in its first half. There are really only two major set-pieces. Thankfully, they are among the best *Mission* has ever managed. The first is a true nail-biter and nerve-shredder, in which Ethan makes a daring, potentially deadly ocean dive to retrieve the Entity's source code from a sunken submarine. It features one of the great rotating sets of cinema, equalling *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Inception* in its disorientating brilliance, its potent application of production design.

And the final showdown, in which all the chess pieces finally converge, sees Ethan engage in a jaw-dropping battle in the skies, Cruise hopping casually between two biplanes, with some of the maddest, most astonishing stunts he has ever achieved. Your jaw will detach and your palms will leak sweat. However you feel about the star, his commitment to spectacle and showmanship remains extraordinary. Old enough to qualify for a pensioner's bus pass, he has never been more game — and is still running, relentlessly, even when there are ample public-transport options available nearby. Running like his life depends on it. Running like *cinema* depends on it. He is the effective self-appointed UN ambassador to the movies, the last true Movie Star. If this is indeed his final mission, it's quite the appropriate swansong — but let's hope the door will stay open, should he once again choose to accept.

JOHN NUGENT

VERDICT **A tense, knotty opening act yields to some of Tom Cruise's most impressive stunts yet, ending the film — and perhaps the series — on a high.**

Here: Street fighter: Ben Wang as Li Fong. **Below right:** Vets Jackie Chan and Ralph Macchio with Li; Boxing not clever.

FILM

KARATE KID: LEGENDS

WAX ON, WAX OFF WITH TWO MARTIAL-ARTS MASTERS

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **118 MINS**

DIRECTOR Jonathan Entwistle
CAST Ben Wang, Jackie Chan, Ralph Macchio, Sadie Stanley, Ming-Na Wen, Joshua Jackson, Aramis Knight

PLOT After teenager Li Fong (Wang) moves from Beijing to New York City, he must learn to master both kung fu and karate techniques.

FUN FACT: ORIGINAL *Karate Kid* and *Cobra Kai* star Ralph Macchio is now older than Pat Morita was when he last played Mr Miyagi (1994's *The Next Karate Kid*). Meanwhile, the *Karate Kid* remake's Miyagi-surrogate Jackie Chan (aka Mr Han) is now only two years younger than Morita was when he passed away in 2005. Age has been super-kind to both, but given this long-running franchise has always focused on its youthful protagonists, it should really come as no surprise that, despite their prominence on the poster and the enticing promise of a remake universe/*Cobra Kai* crossover, much of this instalment's run-time is devoted to complete newcomer Ben Wang.

He's a likeable-enough presence in a wholesome drama that hits most of the same montage-peppered beats as the 1984 original and the 2010 Chan-starring version. Kid moves to new town/country. Kid meets girl (here, Sadie Stanley). Kid encounters martial-arts bullies. Kid trains up with idiosyncratic mentor(s). Kid enters big tournament and comes of age. Along the way there are some impressive fight sequences, considerably boosted by the involvement of the Jackie Chan Stunt Team.

Wang's skilfulness definitely tilts towards the acrobatic rather than the thespian, but though it requires his character Li to wrestle with a family-tragedy-related demon, this is hardly demanding material. Still, there are some interesting twists. For much of the film's first half, it is actually the Kid doing the mentoring, sharing kung-fu techniques with an over-the-hill boxer who's in hock to a loan shark. Then, once Li enters his own tournament, there's the big promise of the Daniel-*san*/Mr Han *sensei*/*shifu* double team.

The script doesn't concern itself too much with explaining how this happens. A little bit of old-footage manipulation and ret-con logic explains how Mr Miyagi's ancestor actually trained and collaborated with Mr Han's forebear, making Miyagi karate and Han kung-fu. So when Mr Han — Li's great uncle — realises his punchy prodigy needs some karate nous, he knows who to call. That this happens over an hour into the movie is a little disappointing. Macchio's presence feels like a late-draft addition, with the movie sadly having scant narrative connection to *Cobra Kai*. Even Chan doesn't have that much to do, and only gets a couple of brisk action scenes.

But *Karate Kid: Legends* is peppy and warm-hearted enough to excuse its shortcomings. Especially if you're already nostalgically invested in the 41-year-old series and just can't resist a training montage or freeze-frame punch-the-air victory shot. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT ***Karate Kid: Legends*** **doesn't quite live up to the promise of its *Cobra Kai*-meets-Mr Han marketing. But for breezy feel-goodness, you've come to the right *dojo*.**

LOLLIPOP

★★★★

OUT **13 JUNE** / CERT **12A** / **100 MINS**
DIRECTOR Daisy-May Hudson
CAST Posy Sterling, Idil Ahmed, TerriAnn Cousins, Tegan-Mia Stanley Rhoads

Daisy-May Hudson's debut fiction feature *Lollipop* is about homelessness. Courtesy of its discerning script, it will surprise nobody that it is anchored in the writer-director's experience. Because of a legislative loophole, Molly (Posy Sterling), who is sleeping in a tent, can't get her children back without a home, but is low priority to get a house without her kids. Any time Molly spends with them is supervised, and Sterling excels as a woman unravelling under the strain of social workers' judgemental gaze. A straightforward hardship tale this is not, though. *Lollipop* settles on a message of holding onto hope in a crushing system. Blistering and impressively even-handed, *Lollipop* crackles with energy. **MB**

HALLOW ROAD

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **80 MINS**
DIRECTOR Babak Anvari
CAST Rosamund Pike, Matthew Rhys, Megan McDonnell, Paul Tylak

Keeping things interesting in a confined space is an impressive cinematic feat. In Babak Anvari's excellent fourth feature, the vast majority of the 80-minute runtime focuses entirely on two actors in a car — making for a lean, mean, tension-filled ride. The set-up is simple but effective: a panicked phone call from Alice (Megan McDonnell) rouses her parents Maddie (Rosamund Pike) and Frank (Matthew Rhys); after driving off following a disastrous family dinner, she's accidentally hit a girl with her car in a pitch-black forest. What unfolds is a parent's worst-case scenario, but Anvari's tight, precise direction keeps things unpredictable. An unsettling ride worth taking. **AW**

Should have gone for the Uber Exec. **Below:** The joke falls flat.

FILM

DEEP COVER

THE DEPARTED* MEETS *WHOSE LINE IS IT ANYWAY?

★★★★

OUT **12 JUNE (PRIME VIDEO)** / CERT **18** / **100 MINS**

DIRECTOR Tom Kingsley
CAST Bryce Dallas Howard, Orlando Bloom, Nick Mohammed, Paddy Considine, Ian McShane, Sean Bean, Sonoya Mizuno

PLOT Three struggling improv comedians are hired by the police for low-level sting operations. They quickly find themselves in way over their heads.

THERE'S AN INGENIOUS thought at the centre of *Deep Cover*: if undercover work is, effectively, Method acting, what would happen if you put an improv group — whose very instinct is to 'yes, and' a situation — into minor sting operations? Tom Kingsley's comedy feature not only commits conceptually to that idea — it does so structurally, too, barrelling forward as it throws our heroes into situations of increasing danger and absurdity.

That initial idea came from Colin Trevorrow (*Jurassic World*) and his writing partner Derek Connolly; their screenplay was retooled by British comedy duo The Pin — aka Ben Ashenden and Alexander Owen, briefly seen in *Jurassic World Dominion* — and relocated to London. The joyous absurdity of the duo's lockdown sketch videos is largely intact here, as *Deep Cover* both leans into tropes and subverts them to pull off sizeable laughs.

It helps that the material is in great hands. Bryce Dallas Howard's pure charisma shines through in Kat (improv skills: sizeable), who waited too long for her big break and sees police sting work as an easy £200. Orlando Bloom isn't known for LOLs galore, but revels in playing it super-serious as Method mad Marlon (improv skills: moderate), desperate to escape his

advertising mascot role, 'Pizza Knight'. "You're from the Cotswolds, you're not Al Pacino," his exasperated agent reminds him. Wringing the most laughs is *Ted Lasso*'s Nick Mohammed as sweet, mild-mannered Hugh (improv skills: non-existent). Watching him snort multiple lines of coke ("Very nice. Very nice!" he assures Paddy Considine's Mob boss Fly) or trying to dispose of a body on a Boris bike is a delight.

Smartly, everything around the trio is played largely straight. Shot on real London streets, with narrative rug-pulls in its crime story, it sticks to Kat's improv rules: escalate the stakes and chuck in a grenade every so often. Sean Bean channels *Slow Horses*' Jackson Lamb as the gruff Northern copper in charge of Kat and co, who dispatches the trio to buy counterfeit cigarettes, and watches in awe and horror as they're swiftly sucked into *Gangs Of London* territory.

If anything, it's The Pin's own appearances — as police officers seeking Kat, Marlon and Hugh, unaware the trio are undercover — that threaten to unbalance things, since they can't help going for laughs themselves. But in all other regards, *Deep Cover* is well constructed, committing to the bit in the gag department while delivering clear set-ups and pay-offs for its central characters — a comedy that, beyond the class-A drugs and body bags, is about how improv gives three lonely losers a new lease on life. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT **Does *Deep Cover* work as an improv comedy? Yes, and it delivers strong characterisation, a twisty crime story, and great performances too. End scene.**

An unfortunate chain of events for Erik (Richard Harmon).

FILM

FINAL DESTINATION BLOODLINES

DEATH RETURNS FROM SICK LEAVE

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **110 MINS**

DIRECTORS Zach Lipovsky, Adam B. Stein
CAST Kaitlyn Santa Juana, Richard Harmon, Owen Patrick Joyner, Brec Bassinger, Tony Todd

PLOT College student Stefani (Juana) dreams of hundreds of strangers dying. But the real threat is closer to home as the Grim Reaper goes after her family.

YOU DON'T NEED ESP to know that *Final Destination Bloodlines* will start with a premonition. And this one's a belter, eclipsing the plane crash (1), roller coaster derailment (3), speedway crash (4) and suspension bridge collapse (5) that have previously acted as the franchise's gory-glory curtain-raisers. Heck, it perhaps even rivals the second instalment's Route 2 pile-up that made driving behind a logging truck such a no-no for all right-minded motorists.

The precog carnage this time takes place atop a soaring, needle-thin tower not unlike the Stratosphere in Las Vegas, as revellers in the sky-view restaurant stomp their stuff to a band playing 'Shout'. Iris (Brec Bassinger) is the one being 'treated' to a preview, as a rogue coin flung by a bratty kid kickstarts Death's signature Rube Goldberg routine: champagne corks pop, drums thud, chandeliers tremor, rivets spring, heels scrape, the glass floor cracks, and... well, by the time this extended set-piece finally comes to rest in pieces, chances are the cinema you're watching it in will be rocking with applause.

But while this thrilling opener is everything you'd expect from a *Final Destination* movie, it's also something different — set in the 1960s. We then crash-cut to the present as Stefani (Kaitlyn Santa Juana) awakens screaming. Plagued by night terrors for two months now, she's flunking college, her scholarship in doubt. And so she decides to investigate the recurring nightmare. Might the Iris in the dream be her long-lost grandmother?

Entertaining as it is, the *Final Destination* franchise was getting tired when it was laid to rest in 2011 — there are only so many times you can rinse and repeat before the Grim Reaper's scythe gets rusted. This reboot, then, offers a tweak to the format, with the group in peril being not pals and a rando or two, but a family. Searching for answers, Stefani teams up with her younger brother Charlie (Teo Briones), cousins Erik, Bobby and Julia (Richard Harmon, Owen Patrick Joyner, Anna Lore), and estranged mum Darlene (Rya Kihlstedt), only to quickly learn that the family tree is about to be felled.

And so comes the usual Mouse Trap mayhem, all of it splattery fun even if none of it quite reaches the giddy heights of that sustained opener. The gaps between the elaborate death scenes, meanwhile, are dedicated as much to the fractured family resolving differences as to exploring how they might get Death to chill out. It's hardly *Secrets & Lies*, but the no-name young cast prove likeable enough, and all efforts towards characterisation are appreciated — this is, after all, a franchise built on wafer-thin characters, where what's inside is only of interest when it's on the outside, in the gooiest form possible. The best bit of family drama has a major skeleton clatter out of the closet in a manner that's both funny and clever, sure to

KEEP 'EM PEELED

[redacted]

Aged 71, stuntwoman Yvette Ferguson came out of retirement to be set ablaze in the opening sequence. Directors Lipovsky and Stein say she's "the oldest person ever on fire, on camera".

Top to bottom: Owen Patrick Joyner's Bobby comes a cropper; The hottest restaurant in town; Brec Bassinger's Iris amid the expertly crafted carnage.

wrong-foot fans who have become expert in sifting through the red herrings that make each death in the franchise a guessing game.

In fact, the screenplay, by Guy Busick (*Scream*) and Lori Evans Taylor (*Cellar Door*) from a story by Jon Watts (the Tom Holland *Spider-Man* trilogy), is smart throughout, and is matched by the peppy direction of Zach Lipovsky and Adam. B. Stein. Their 2018 movie, *Freaks*, one-upped both screen versions of Stephen King's *Firestarter* in just how to do a sci-fi horror about a young girl with escalating psychic powers, and the directors here demonstrate a similarly crisp understanding of dog-eared material.

Clearly desiring to hit every base, *Final Destination Bloodlines* runs through all of the how-to-cheat-death rules that were fitfully established over the first five movies, tosses out Easter eggs with the forceful abandon of giant logs bouncing down a highway, and at last offers an explanation — and a satisfying one, at that — as to why mortician William Bludworth (Tony Todd) is such an expert on Death. Reprising his fan-favourite role from the first, second and fifth instalments, genre icon Todd, who passed away last November, is here visibly ill as he courageously delivers his final performance. He brings pathos to the line, "Life is precious... enjoy every single second," and the film is dedicated to his memory — still, reflective moments amid the rush of squishing heads, bursting eyeballs and tearing genital piercings. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

VERDICT Laugh as you barf. This fun reboot is crammed with affectionate nods and grisly kills as it bids a fond farewell to Tony Todd. Might it have been called 'Ultimate Destination'?

A Bono of contention. **Below:** Sitting down on the job.

FILM

BONO: STORIES OF SURRENDER

WILL THIS FILM GIVE YOU VERTIGO?

★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / CERT **TBC** / **86 MINS**

DIRECTOR Andrew Dominik
PARTICIPANTS Bono

PLOT On a near-empty stage, U2 lead singer Bono recounts stories of his life, shares his fears and doubts, and sings some of his most famous songs.

LET'S GET THE obvious joke out of the way first: no, despite being produced by Apple, this film will not be automatically and nonconsensually forced onto your iPhone. Unlike U2's notorious 2014 album *Songs Of Innocence*, which one day magically appeared on the world's Apple devices whether you liked it or not, you actually have a choice over whether to watch *Bono: Stories Of Surrender*. Which way you go with that choice rather depends on how big a fan you are.

This is an unusual proposition. A filmed version of Bono's well-received one-man stage show — itself an adaptation of his memoir *Surrender: 40 Songs, One Story — Stories Of Surrender* can't really be called a documentary in the truest sense. There is no archive footage here, no childhood photos, no early recordings of the band. Filmed by Australian director Andrew Dominik in gorgeously crisp, contrast-heavy, black-and-white photography, it is essentially an arty concert film, centred around one man talking about himself for 90 minutes.

To be fair to Bono, he seems well aware of what this looks like, and makes valiant efforts to pre-empt any vanity-project accusations, openly describing the evening as "preposterous navel-gazing". He also shows commendable self-awareness during the section discussing his well-publicised activism against poverty, despite

his status as a multi-millionaire, willingly accepting the term "hypocrite".

But as refreshing as that is, it doesn't quite alleviate the strangeness of this format. Bono's story may work well on the page, but presented here, in a kind of mannered, performance-artist whisper, it all feels a bit daft. The stage is largely empty, save for a huge LED lighting rig and the odd prop, which might have worked gangbusters in person, but cinematically feels a bit empty and textureless.

Which leaves us with the curious experience of watching one of the world's biggest rock stars doing some Edinburgh Fringe-style play-acting. His re-enactment of conversations with his late father are sweet, but other scenes just induce cringes: an extended impression of opera singer Luciano Pavarotti, a long-winded anecdote about Princess Diana, and in perhaps the film's oddest moment, the perplexing sight of Bono romantically serenading and dancing with a chair, meant to represent his wife.

It's hard to truly dislike this enterprise, because it's all so utterly earnest: love him or hate him, Bono clearly really *cares* — about his activism, his family, and his art. We get some heartfelt tributes to his band, origin stories for his songs, and then some stripped-down renditions of those songs, backed by classical musicians. If you were already a Bono-sseur, it will be a treat. But this approach isn't going to win over any converts. Just be glad it wasn't automatically added to your phone. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT Strictly-for-fans-only. Bono is a charismatic chronicler of his own life, but the self-conscious storytelling concept is a harder thing to stomach for non-enthusiasts.

Ace in the hole? **Below:** Murder-mystery turns meta.

TV

POKER FACE: SEASON 2

JUST ONE MORE THING FROM NATASHA LYONNE'S *COLUMBO* RIFF

★★★★

OUT **NOW (SKY/NOW)** / EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 12**

SHOWRUNNERS Nora Zuckerman, Lilla Zuckerman
CAST Natasha Lyonne, Benjamin Bratt, Cynthia Erivo, Melanie Lynskey, Giancarlo Esposito, Simon Rex, Katie Holmes, Rhea Perlman

PLOT Back on the run, Charlie Cale (Lyonne) continues to solve mysteries using her lie-detecting ability on a road-trip across America.

WITH HER SIGNATURE BS detector and a "voice like a rusty clarinet", casino worker and sleuth Charlie Cale (Natasha Lyonne) is back in search of new mysteries to solve, making a very welcome return in showrunner Rian Johnson's other detective-fiction franchise. This time, Charlie is looking for somewhere to hide: on the run again, this time from Rhea Perlman's mobster, who wants her dead following the events of last season.

But a few things have changed. Lyonne's inquisitive road-tripper is trying to quit smoking, for one, with dubious help from a cotton candy-flavoured vape. After directing and co-writing one episode in the first run, Lyonne also steps up to helm more instalments of this expanded 12-episode run. That calls for a bigger, somehow even more impressive guest list for Season 2, which includes Melanie Lynskey, Kumail Nanjiani, Giancarlo Esposito, Cynthia Erivo (x 5, as quintuplets) and far too many others to list in full. (Although it'd be remiss to ignore Taylor Schilling and Adrienne C. Moore's reunion with Lyonne, following their Emmy-nominated work together in *Orange Is The New Black*.)

What hasn't changed, however, is the central format, which still opens each week with a crime

that Cale then pieces together, *Columbo*-style. This procedural 'howdunnit' traverses the oddest corners of everyday Americana, with new mysteries set everywhere from Minor League baseball games to creepy funeral homes and even a local police award ceremony, each functioning as its own mini world with a unique style and tone. We are offered a '70s-style horror one minute and Daisy, the "Judy Garland of alligators", the next.

Lyonne and Johnson clearly take inspiration from all kinds of '70s American cinema, in fact, drawing on the visual style of greats like Robert Altman and Peter Bogdanovich, while Lyonne has gone on record to share that her performance is inspired in part by Elliott Gould in Altman's *The Long Goodbye*. But Charlie is ultimately a deadpan being that only Lyonne could have come up with: a curious, empathic and extremely laid-back creation who continues to ground each outlandish case with a likeable throughline.

Fortunately the team behind this show aren't so laid-back, refusing to rest on their laurels despite some much-deserved Emmy success last time round. The baseball-themed episode pitches entirely left-field with its visuals, for example, while a twist in Episode 3 redefines Charlie's entire journey. The case-of-the-week format remains in place, mostly unchanged, but the serialised story that holds it together becomes more introspective and even existential, proving that the series' ambition isn't just limited to casting TV's most enviable guest list. **DAVID OPIE**

VERDICT **If the impressive highs of Season 2 are anything to go by, *Poker Face* could easily go on for ten more seasons and just get better each time. (No lies detected.)**

TV

STAR WARS: TALES OF THE UNDERWORLD

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **6 OF 6**
SHOWRUNNER Dave Filoni
CAST Nika Futterman, Corey Burton, Artt Butler, Lane Factor

The animated *Star Wars*: *Tales Of...* series has explored the paths of notable Jedi and then took a walk on the dark side; this third set of stories turns its focus to the underground, where Asajj Ventress (Nika Futterman) and Cad Bane (Corey Burton) reside. With the six episodes ranging from 12 to 17 minutes long, split evenly between the two headliners, it's another slickly packaged bundle from creator Dave Filoni that does a lot with a little. Ventress' story is thin, but sweet; the more impactful narrative is reserved for Cad Bane, giving some fascinating insight into one of the galaxy's most mysterious blasters-for-hire. It's an illuminating journey into the shadows of *Star Wars*' murkier side. **AW**

FILM

ANOTHER SIMPLE FAVOUR

★★★

OUT **NOW (PRIME VIDEO)** / CERT **15** / **121 MINS**
DIRECTOR Paul Feig
CAST Anna Kendrick, Blake Lively, Henry Golding, Allison Janney

Paul Feig's sequel to *A Simple Favour* heads overseas, as supermom/detective hero Stephanie (Anna Kendrick) is blackmailed into becoming maid of honour for her frenemy, convicted murderer Emily (Blake Lively). Stephanie suspects Emily wants revenge, but soon she's a murder suspect and has to unravel a plot as nonsensical as that of the first film, but more predictable. Happily, Feig leans in to the ridiculous elements, decamping to Capri and staging the drama at an over-the-top wedding; Lively in particular has great fun swanning around suspiciously in outrageous couture. It feels like a holiday, and a fun one at that, but could have used a few wilder turns just to keep us — like its stilettoed leading ladies — on our toes. **HOH**

Billionaire boys' club: Cory Michael Smith, Steve Carell, Ramy Youssef and Jason Schwartzman.

FILM

MOUNTAINHEAD

JESSE ARMSTRONG'S HIGH-ALTITUDE *SUCCESSION* FOLLOW-UP

★★★★

OUT **NOW (SKY ATLANTIC/NOW)** / CERT **TBC** / **109 MINS**

DIRECTOR Jesse Armstrong
CAST Steve Carell, Jason Schwartzman, Cory Michael Smith, Ramy Youssef, Hadley Robinson

PLOT Four moguls spend a weekend in a mountainside mansion while the world descends into chaos caused by their tech innovations.

AYN RAND'S 1943 novel *The Fountainhead*, a paean to capitalist self-interest, has become a bible for right-wingers and entrepreneurs from Donald Trump to Steve Jobs. In his latest skewering of the super-rich and his first feature film as a director, *Succession*'s Jesse Armstrong borrows the title of Rand's book for a Bond villain-style lair where a group of amoral, mega-powerful tech magnates watch a global crisis unfold, one that they insist they aren't at all responsible for.

We find host Hugo (a wonderfully weaselly Jason Schwartzman), aka 'Souper', waiting at Mountainhead for his friends to arrive and praying one of them will "bust a B-nut" (i.e. invest a billion dollars) in his new wellness app. But his guests have more pressing matters on their minds. Elon Musk-alike Venis (Cory Michael Smith), the richest of the quartet, has unveiled a generative AI feature on his social-media platform that's spreading disinformation and causing intense IRL violence across the world. Jeff (Ramy Youssef), a rising star with a shred of a conscience, could quell all this political unrest with his improved AI system but refuses to sell it to long-time frenemy Venis. And finally Randall (Steve Carell), known as 'Papa Bear' and 'Dark Money Gandalf', is desperate to achieve 'trans-human' immortality after a terminal-cancer diagnosis.

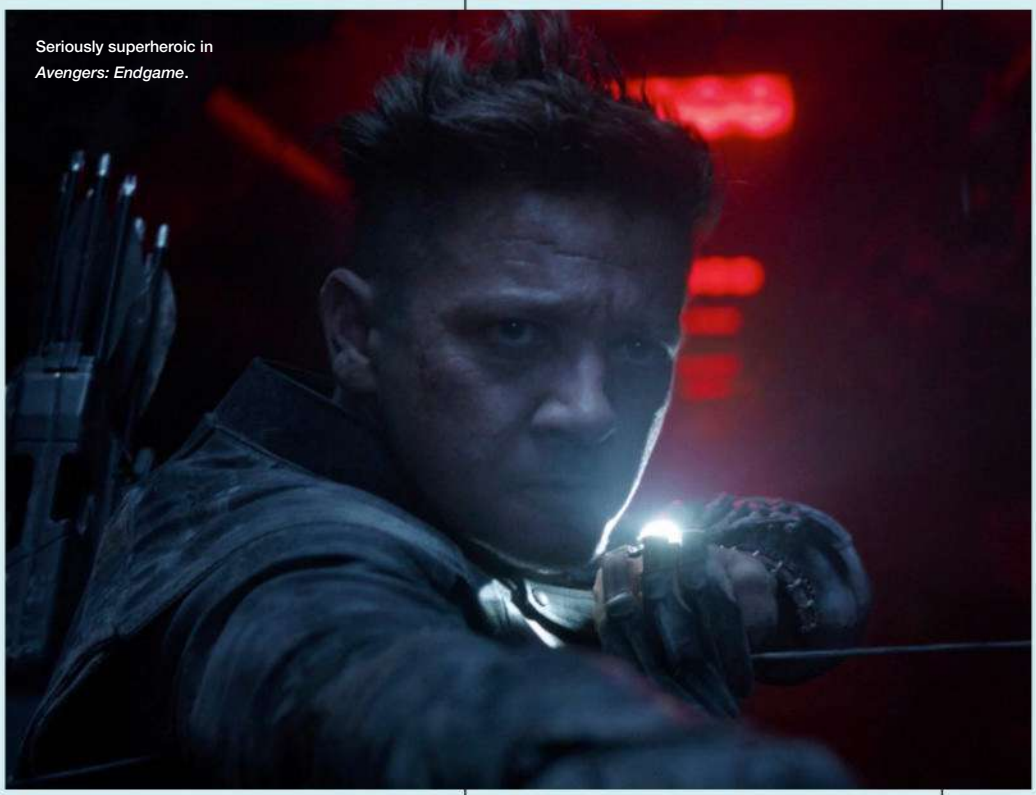
As *Succession* fans might expect, in this all too topical black comedy, some frat-bro joshing, including trekking to a mountaintop where Souper writes their net worth on their chests in lipstick, escalates into brutal backstabbing and genuine attempts at world domination. Virtually every scene takes place inside this concrete-grey monstrosity ("Was your interior decorator Ayn Bland?!"), the cold seemingly seeping into the very walls, or on the surrounding snowy mountain range.

All four leads are having a whale of a time with Armstrong's deliciously nasty script, which is peppered with the douchiest tech-bro banter known to man and cringey faux-intellectual debate. Cory Michael Smith continues to impress after his small role in *May December*, inflecting Venis with a profoundly pathetic loneliness beneath his bluster, and Carell effortlessly oscillates between warm patriarch and ruthless assassin. Although the film is heavy on talk and light on action, it's perversely pleasurable to spend time with these hollow scumbags who perceive real people's lives as "fungible human assets". The power wielded by these overgrown teenage boys, desperate to be adored, would seem ludicrous if it didn't feel so painfully true. It's hardly subtle, but it speaks to the unsubtle times we're living in. **LAURA VENNING**

KILLER QUOTE

"Are we sure we'd be better at running the world? Because you're boiling an egg with no water."
JEFF (RAMY YOUSSEF)

VERDICT **Darkly funny as it descends into farce and ends on a chilling final note, *Mountainhead* is, unfortunately, truly a film for the 2020s. Just don't chase it with a doomscrolling session.**


Seriously superheroic in *Avengers: Endgame*.

BOOKS

MY NEXT BREATH

RENNER TURNS WRITER

★★★

AUTHOR **JEREMY RENNER**

CHALLENGE. ACTION. Forward. Motivation. Strong. Positive. Blessed. Power. Healing. Family. Love. Love. Love. A lot of self-help books use language that's so relentlessly positive, so full of exhortation and encouragement, that the net effect is, instead, exhaustion. This memoir by Jeremy Renner endlessly echoes these sentiments, but draws from deeply held, and earned, belief. By his own account, Renner's drive not only brought him Hollywood fame and fortune, but literally saved his life.

The Marvel mainstay faced his own Hurt Locker (sorry) when he was run over by a snow plough on 1 January 2023. There's a picture of the offending vehicle in the book, and it's horrifyingly large. Crushed on the ice, one eye popped out of his skull and with 38 broken bones, he was given low odds of survival. But such prognostications failed to reckon with the unstoppable force that is Renner himself, as this book details at length.

The result is, perhaps not always intentionally, a fascinating insight into a man whose own survival odyssey retroactively justified all his tough-guy roles. Renner details how some of the techniques he had learned as an actor, particularly breathwork, saved his life as he tried to suck air into his shattered chest. He also dissects how a youth spent systematically overcoming his fears helped him through the darkness, and how a relentless drive to improve himself helped his "one way road" to recovery.

It's not a humble book, but then, Renner has little to be humble about, with his successful career, Oscar nominations and now triumph over death itself. That said, he's quick to acknowledge his role in causing the accident, and to credit the family, neighbours, EMTs, nurses and surgeons who saved his life, so he's not completely solipsistic. His first action, on waking, was to scrawl an apology to his family for the emotional agony his accident caused them, and helping them to heal is a subject that preoccupies him.

But what really makes the book readable, and moving, is his endless return to the theme of love. It was the "mattress" of loving family and friends that protected him during his rocky first years as an actor and through all the hard days since, the same love that had co-stars visiting him in hospital (though his conversations with Jamie Foxx were apparently a drug-induced hallucination) and family watching over him 24/7. It was the love of his family and friends, particularly his daughter Ava, that he credits with keeping him fighting that day, and the heroic actions of his nephew Alex that got help to him fast enough to save him. It's hard to quibble with all this ultra-positive language when he really does have so many blessings to count. **HELEN O'HARA**

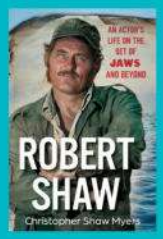
VERDICT **For all the mantras ("Not today, motherfucker!" is a favourite) and endless chat about motivation, the most important words in Renner's story are "healing" and "love", and those are ones that we can all adopt.**

THE VIRGIN SUICIDES

★★★★

EDITOR **SOFIA COPPOLA**

There's something bittersweet about this beautiful portfolio. Comprised almost entirely of images by British fashion photographer Corinne Day, taken on the set of Sofia Coppola's debut film, it's all candid, sun-dappled nostalgia. But these unseen portraits of a young Kirsten Dunst and her co-stars are lent an extra dimension of tragedy when you learn that Day died in 2010, aged just 48. A book as sad and beguiling as the film. **JN**

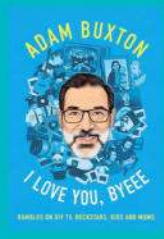


ROBERT SHAW

★★★

AUTHOR **CHRISTOPHER SHAW MYERS**

Subtitled 'An Actor's Life On The Set Of *Jaws* And Beyond', this book by Robert Shaw's nephew is more a warm family snapshot than movie-star biog. It's an oddly structured affair and the *Jaws* material offers little new — playwright Thornton Wilder played a key role in the famed Indianapolis speech — but is more successful depicting the formidable women in Shaw's life. An entertaining account of the shaping of a larger-than-life figure. **IF**

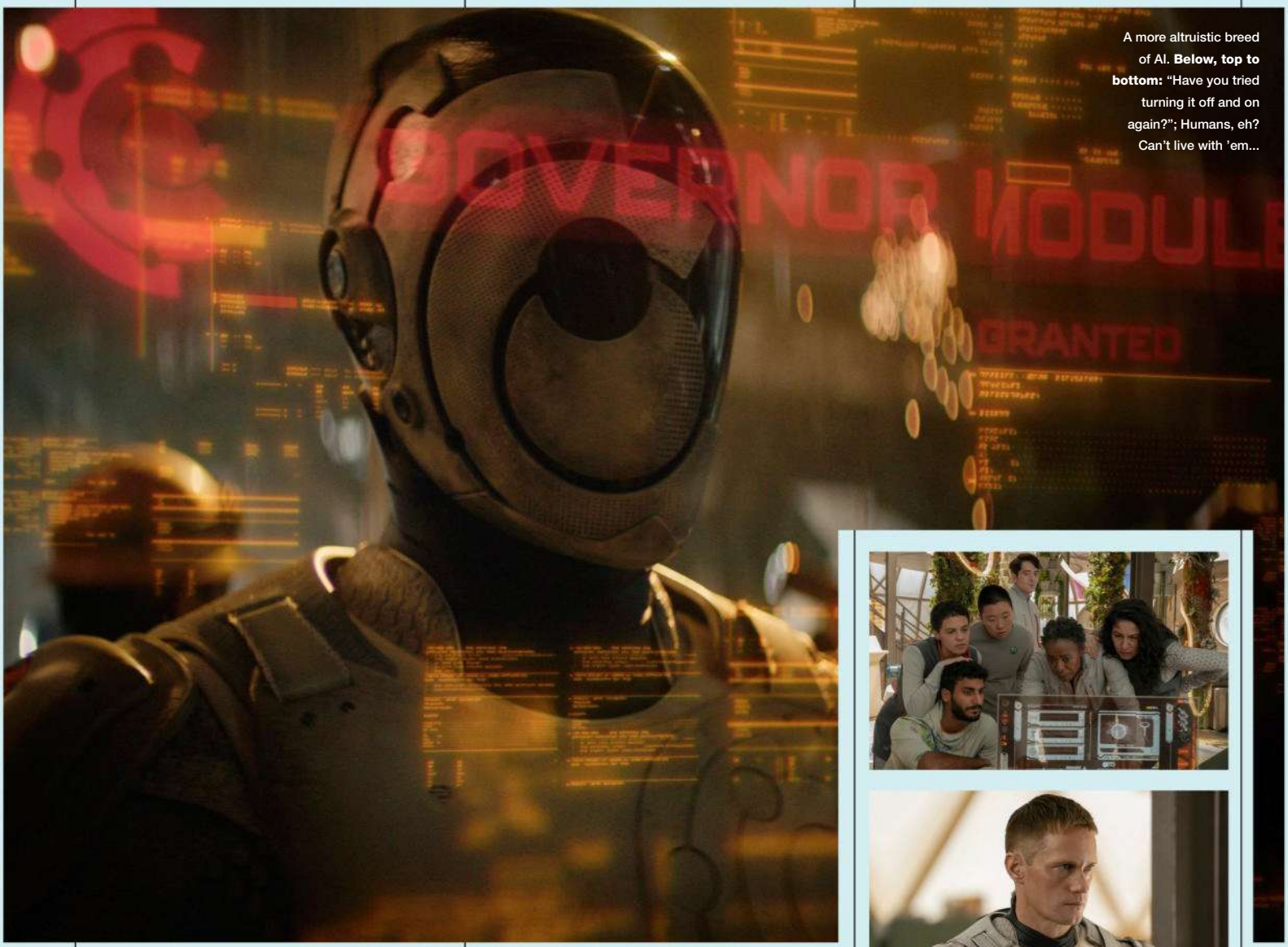


I LOVE YOU, BYEEE

★★★★

AUTHOR **ADAM BUXTON**

Adam Buxton is fast approaching national-treasure status. His first memoir, *Ramble Book*, was a nostalgic tribute to his late father and early childhood juvenilia; this, his second, is a similarly evocative eulogy for his late mother, weaving in his early adventures in TV and radio with Joe Cornish — earning a living "making fart jokes and pretending to be a dog". It's charming, funny, self-deprecating and emotional. Stephen! **JN**



A more altruistic breed of AI. **Below, top to bottom:** "Have you tried turning it off and on again?"; Humans, eh? Can't live with 'em...

TV

MURDERBOT

ALEXANDER SKARSGÅRD'S LOVE, DEATH AND ROBOTS

★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNERS Chris Weitz, Paul Weitz
CAST Alexander Skarsgård, David Dastmalchian, Noma Dumezweni, Clark Gregg, John Cho, Jack McBrayer

PLOT When a security cyborg (Skarsgård) gains sentience, he craves a life away from humans. Sadly, he winds up on a hostile planet with some particularly stupid ones.

DON'T READ TOO much into the name. There is not a huge amount of murder in *Murderbot*, but there's plenty of thinking about it. At the heart of this comedy sci-fi — based on the *Murderbot Diaries* books by Martha Wells — is a synthetic lifeform (Alexander Skarsgård) that has had it with humans.

This lifeform is a fleshy artificial being tasked with defending humans, who treat it like crap. A governor module in its system prevents it from making any choices of its own, but when it overrides its governor it gains free will. Its first act of independence is to name itself Murderbot, because it sounds cool. Alas, even as master of its own mind, Murderbot cannot seem to free itself of humans and their tiresome, illogical ways. Keen not to immediately expose its new sentience and risk destruction, Murderbot allows itself to be sent on an interplanetary mission with a bunch of bickering hippie scientists. New to this whole 'making your own' choices thing, it tries to work out how to go its own way but finds itself starting to bond with its largely useless team.

Developed by Paul and Chris Weitz, *Murderbot* is a fun spin on the typical 'robot goes wrong' tropes. This one would rather like to kill all its crew, but it never seems quite the right time. As the supposedly safe planet reveals itself to be riddled with monsters and other baddies, Murderbot's instinct is to help the humans. The show plays cleverly, and lightly, with themes of what makes us human. The scientists are even less liberated than Murderbot, who grows fascinated by their lack of purpose and resistance to doing anything but what they're told.

Like its title character, *Murderbot* often seems undecided about what it wants to be. With its short episodes — around 25 minutes — and workplace-comedy set-up, it primes you to expect a sitcom, but it doesn't have sitcom rhythms or structure. It's plot-light and its comedy is less in jokes than Murderbot's observations of humanity. It is, by its nature, largely about just watching people exist, in their myriad peculiar ways. Longer episodes may have given more room to flesh out the supporting cast and deepen the story, rather than needing to rush to a pre-credits cliffhanger.

Skarsgård is always lots of fun in the lead, delivering his frequently violent opinions on his crewmates in deadpan voiceover. He's particularly good in the fourth episode, the season's best, when Murderbot's circuits go haywire and he thinks he's in an actual space sitcom. It's a flash of a goofier, wilder direction this show could go in if it carries on beyond this season. Then *Murderbot* could be killer. **OLLY RICHARDS**

VERDICT As a comedy it's not especially funny, but an intriguing premise, weirdo mood and enjoyable performance from Skarsgård carry it over the line.

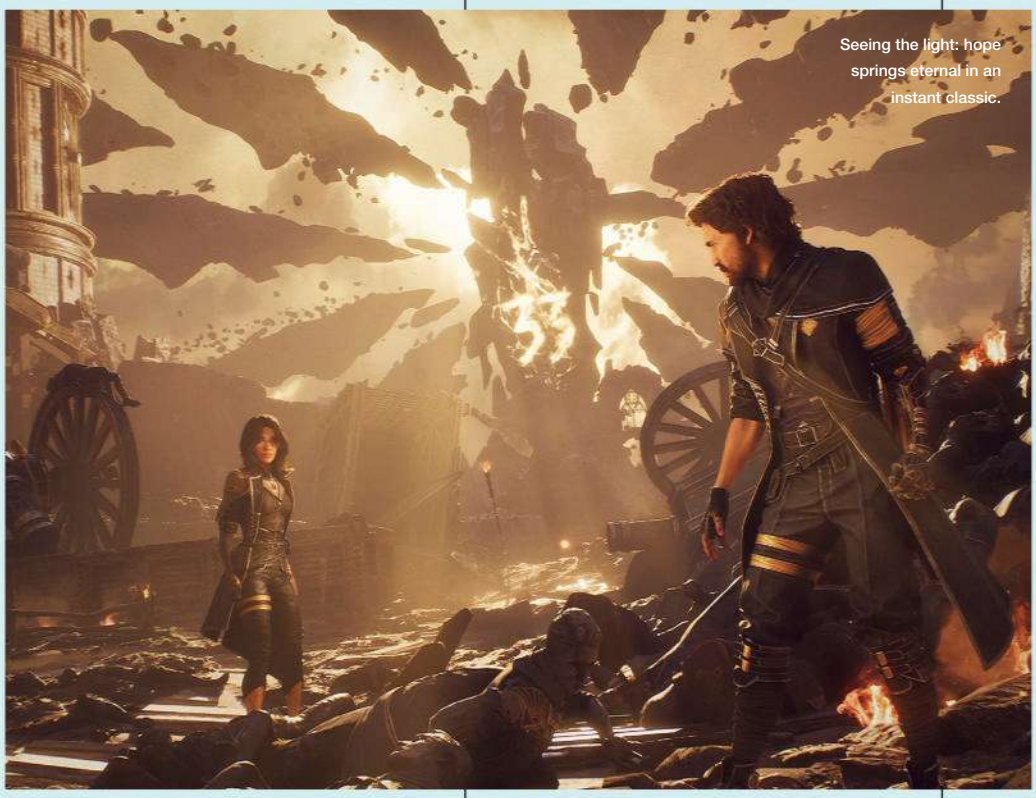
GAMES

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

THIS GAME IS CLAIRLY BRILLIANT

★★★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S



Seeing the light: hope springs eternal in an instant classic.

OVER HALF A CENTURY ago, the world was torn apart by the Fracture, the only known survivors eking out an existence on the small island of Lumière. Each year since, in the furthest reaches of the old continent, a mysterious being called the Paintress awakens to etch a number into a monolith, turning everyone of that age to dust — and she's counting down. With only a year until his number's up, inventor Gustave leads an expedition to those distant shores in the hope of stopping the godlike figure — even though none before have returned.

A dark fantasy draped in gorgeous *Belle Époque* livery, *Clair Obscur* dives straight in with complex lore, but effortlessly draws players into its haunting world. Death permeates everything, down to a beautiful but often mournful soundtrack, yet the game feels oddly warm, hopeful — welcoming, even. That's largely down to its fantastic cast of characters, each finding their own reasons to fight on in the face of seemingly inevitable extinction.

For Gustave (voiced by *Daredevil*'s Charlie Cox), it's about overcoming loss, his former lover Sophie having been taken by the Paintress, while for ally Lune (Kirsty Rider) the expedition is a research opportunity, seeking comfort in knowledge. Most interesting are Maelle (Jennifer English), Gustave's 16-year-old ward, joining up young rather than wasting her short life in Lumière, and Verso (Ben Starr), a seemingly immortal figure observing the expedition for his own reasons. For a game so rooted in esoteric strangeness — there's a tribe of angry paintbrush people to meet, and that's not even close to the weirdest part — it's humanistic to its core.

Despite coming from French studio Sandfall Interactive, *Clair Obscur* is a love letter to classic Japanese RPGs. The influence of genre titans *Final Fantasy* and *Persona* (and even a dash of *Dark Souls*) is clear but evolved, particularly in combat blending turn-based and real-time systems to magnificent effect. Gone is the rote, "I hit, you hit" approach, instead demanding consideration of each character's unique skills to build damage over multiple turns, all while dodging and parrying enemy attacks as they happen. Timing those can be tricky, but it makes even the most rudimentary trading of blows feel spectacular, especially in set-piece boss-fights that see the entire party ricocheting around as reality itself warps and distends around them.

While elevated mechanics might satisfy alone, it's with powerfully emotional writing and genuinely shocking plot twists that *Clair Obscur* cements itself as an instant classic. A movie adaptation is already in the works, but this is an expedition worth taking right now. **MATT KAMEN**

VERDICT **As an RPG, it may feel cosily familiar in places, but *Clair Obscur* is far more than a remix — it's an immediate contender for one of the best in the genre.**

THE HORROR AT HIGHROOK

★★★

PC

When an esteemed family vanishes from their remote estate, a group of occult detectives is sent to investigate. A single-player digital boardgame, *Highrook* has you playing cards, matching character skills with tasks to uncover secrets and open rooms in the mansion, while balancing the team's health, exhaustion, hunger, and sanity. It often feels more book than game, but weaves a compelling tale of cosmic horror. **MK**

DAYS GONE REMASTERED

★★★★

PS5

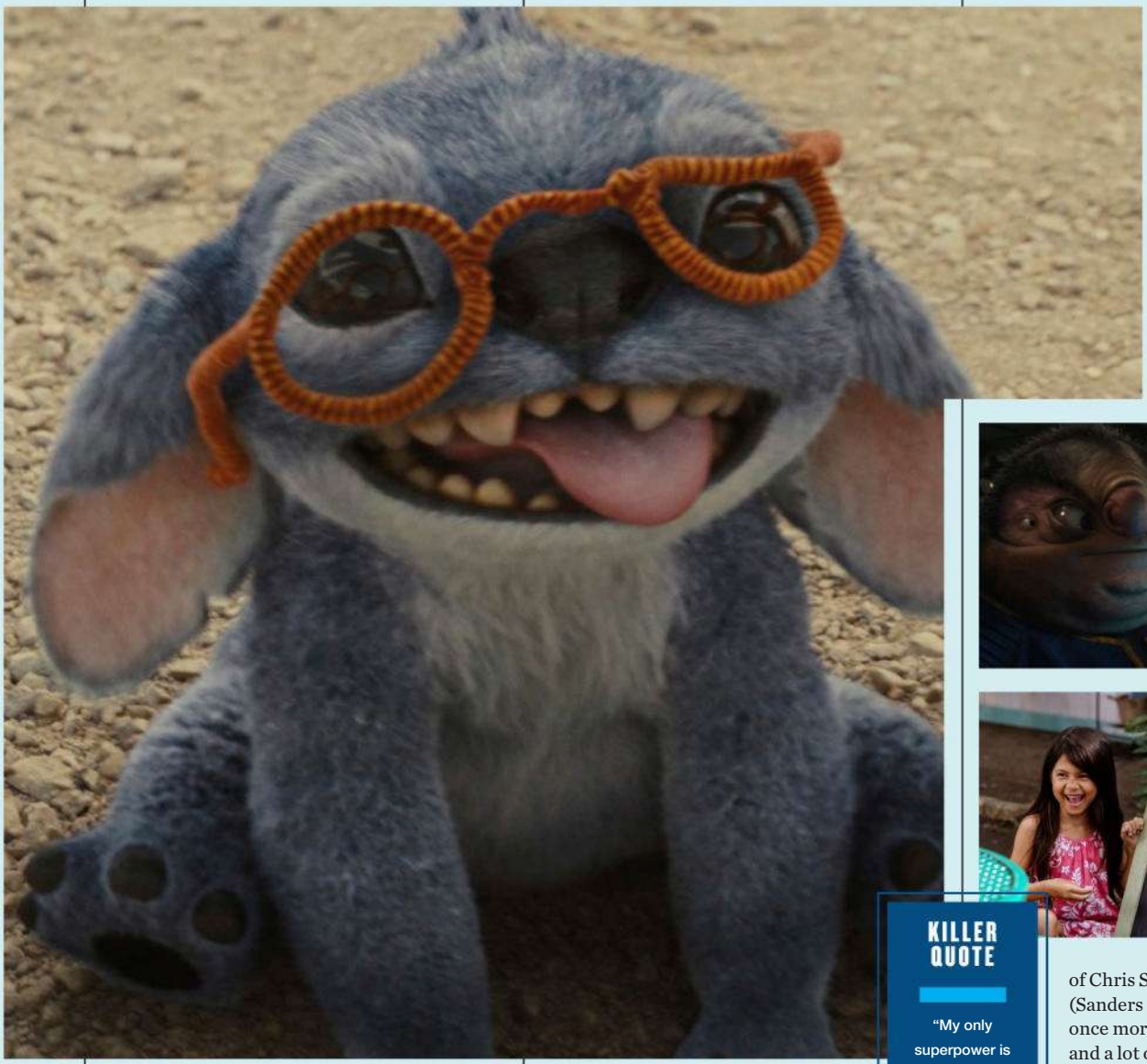
Sony's *Sons Of Anarchy*-meets-*The Walking Dead* open-world zombie epic gets an upgrade, bringing biker Deacon St John's search for wife Sarah across a 'Freaker'-infested Oregon to life like never before. It's as enjoyable as ever and the visual overhaul impresses, but fresh content is simply tougher difficulty options and a new horde mode. A fun ride, even if story-pacing issues persist, not quite earning the big emotional beats. **MK**

STARLESS ABYSS

★★★

PC

In the future, science and magic are one, unified to fight Eldritch forces tearing through reality. As a 'Proximae' guiding advanced starfighters through the void, you'll push back with a blend of turn-based tactics and deckbuilding, with cards determining ship abilities. Battles are tough, but defeat unlocks new characters and expands upon deliciously dark sci-fi lore, making losing an oddly compelling part of the experience. **MK**



Clockwise from main: Furry fiend — Stitch is back; Double trouble: Jumba and Pleakley; Maia Kealoha as Lilo.

FILM

LILO & STITCH

THIS MONTH'S LIVE-ACTION REMAKE OF AN ANIMATED CLASSIC

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **U** / **108 MINS**

DIRECTOR Dean Fleischer Camp
CAST Maia Kealoha, Sydney Elizebeth Agudong, Hannah Waddingham, Billy Magnussen, Zach Galifianakis, Courtney B. Vance, Tia Carrere

PLOT An alien genetic experiment, designed as a superweapon, escapes to Earth and befriends a lonely Hawaiian girl called Lilo (Kealoha).

ONLY A FEW years ago, when considering new projects, the Pixar and Disney teams would ask, "Why does this story need to be told in animation?" The idea was that the art form should only be used to tell the stories that demanded to be animated. That question is perhaps less necessary in this VFX-assisted era. But it might be time to bring it back in reverse form: does this animation need to be live action? Some recent remakes can't help but feel like a lesser effort, and that's sadly the case with *Lilo & Stitch*.

That's despite the considerable efforts of director Dean '*Marcel The Shell With Shoes*' Fleischer Camp and his cast and crew. It's not that they did a bad job, or had too little respect for the original; if anything, quite the opposite. This funny, sweet film still feels like a pale imitation of its sun-soaked predecessor because that's literally what it is: a real-world take on the pastel-and-primary original. They've stripped out a few supporting characters and, smartly, played up the sisterly relationship to take full advantage of the live actors, but it's more rearranging the furniture than remodelling the house.

Maia Kealoha is excellent as young Lilo, as is Sydney Elizebeth Agudong as her sister Nani, who gets a big storytelling boost to become the emotional glue of the whole film. Capable and smart, Nani has put her own life on hold to try and look after her sister after their parents' death, but she's coming apart at the seams too, and even a sympathetic social worker (Tia Carrere, one of the original stars returning in a new role) can't do enough to get them through. Then comes the chaotic addition of Stitch, a furry and more detailed but not actually cuddlier version of Chris Sanders' original monster (Sanders returns to voice Stitch once more). Cue alien shenanigans and a lot of soul-searching by everyone to figure out where they belong in the world.

KILLER QUOTE

"My only superpower is I fart when I run really fast."
LILO (MAIA KEALOHA)

The story, in other words, is largely unchanged in its major beats, though there are some tweaks. Fleischer Camp has cut back on the Elvis songs for a film that's heavier on Hawaiian music, and indeed that feels more rooted in Hawaiian culture. But big moments of emotion and exposition play as oddly woolly, and Lilo's bad behaviour has been softened considerably: she no longer bites her sister, but only licks her arm. It's unclear what lies behind such tweaks, be it concern for child actors, or the demands of having a VFX lead character, but even with an extra 20-odd minutes, this can't add as many laughs or as many emotional gut-punches as you'd hope.

It's not bad; it can't be — it's too similar to the 2002 film that is one of Disney's all-time best. But it's time to either give filmmakers the room to cut loose with these remakes and dare to do something very different, or stop doing them. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT **Fleischer Camp brings a light touch and a good human cast to this reverently faithful effort, but it's never as clear and bright as its source material.**

Korda and co. on a flight of fancy.

FILM

THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME

WES ANDERSON GONNA BE WES ANDERSON-ING

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **101 MINS**

DIRECTOR Wes Anderson
CAST Benicio Del Toro, Mia Threapleton, Michael Cera, Riz Ahmed, Tom Hanks, Bryan Cranston, Scarlett Johansson

PLOT After yet another assassination attempt, tycoon Zsa-zsa Korda (Del Toro) appoints his daughter Liesl (Threapleton) as his sole heir.

WITH EVERY WES Anderson film, the growing concern is that the idiosyncratic filmmaker is becoming a parody of himself. That is, if you don't buy into the fun. Yes, in the director's latest caper, the hallmarks of a Wes film are still there: the framing is as precise as ever, the production design is immaculately detailed, the performances delightfully offbeat. But when mainstream cinema threatens to become more monotonous, lifeless and homogenised with each passing year, why go after a singular artist so settled into his groove that his work has become a genre in itself?

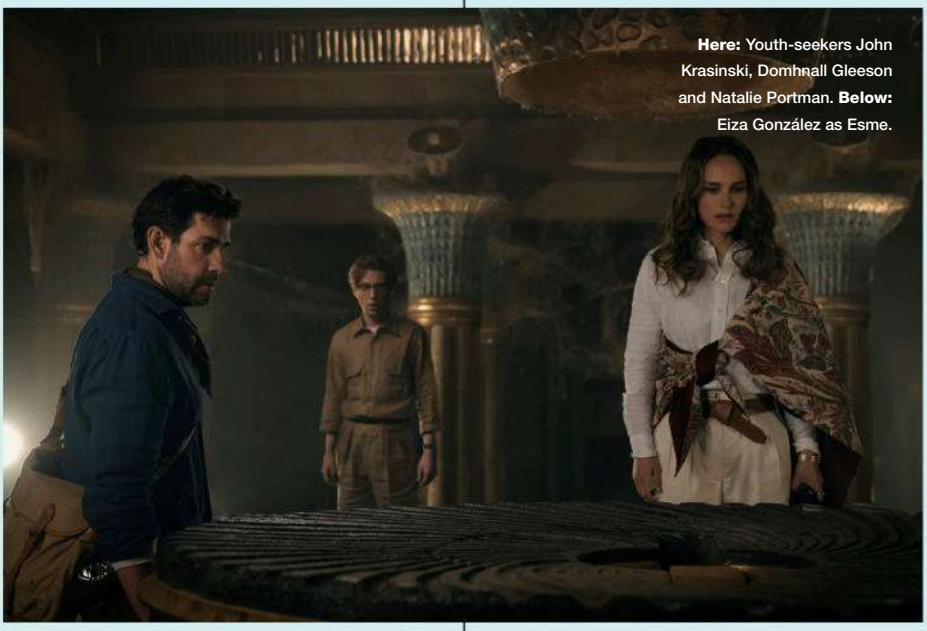
If Anderson's recent output has suffered from anything, it's the sheer bulk of it all. Naysayers criticised *The French Dispatch* for spreading itself thin over its threefold structure, while the layered, meta storytelling of *Asteroid City* could, at times, be challenging. *The Phoenician Scheme* should at least alleviate some of those concerns with its tighter focus. Benicio Del Toro leads as Zsa-zsa Korda, a filthy-rich magnate who's starting to take the hint that some enemies want him gone after his sixth plane crash. Realising he may not be around for much longer, he enlists his daughter Liesl (a razor-sharp Mia Threapleton) to aid him in his latest business venture, even as her moral principles as a nun are wholly (or holy?) at odds with Zsa-zsa's corrupt practices.

The strained relationship between Zsa-zsa and Liesl provides the film's centre as the pair encounter shady syndicates, royals and revolutionaries in their travels. There's incredible world-building here, even as Anderson imbues Phoenicia with vivid detail at such a rapid pace that it can be hard to keep up. Still, even the industrial locations of cavernous tunnels and construction sites are arranged to perfection in typical Anderson fashion.

Tagging along for the adventure is Bjorn (MVP Michael Cera), who might just be the greatest Anderson sidekick since lobby boy Zero in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Cera's character, a professor specialising in insects, takes completely unexpected turns that the actor revels in, finding both the humour and heart while delivering a ridiculously thick Scandi accent.

It's impossible to even entertain the idea that all Wes Anderson films are the same when *The Phoenician Scheme* proves that the director is at his most fun when he bends his rules. (Keep an eye out for a rare Dutch angle from cinema's most level filmmaker.) It may not be for everyone, but Anderson's ability to consistently reinvent himself while retaining his essence will always go down a treat. **IANA MURRAY**

VERDICT **This is textbook Wes Anderson without falling back on old tricks. The rich world of *The Phoenician Scheme* can be a lot to take in, but what a view it is.**



Here: Youth-seekers John Krasinski, Domhnall Gleeson and Natalie Portman. **Below:** Eiza González as Esme.

FILM

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

DOES IT BELONG IN A MUSEUM?

★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / CERT **12A** / **125 MINS**

DIRECTOR Guy Ritchie
CAST John Krasinski, Natalie Portman, Eiza González, Domhnall Gleeson, Carmen Ejogo, Stanley Tucci

PLOT Adventurer Luke (Krasinski) reconnects with his estranged sister Charlotte (Portman) on his quest to locate the mythical fountain of youth.

TREASURE-HUNTING action-adventure films are like precious relics: highly prized, surprisingly rare, only occasionally solid gold. Guy Ritchie's *Fountain Of Youth* consciously tries to muscle in on *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, Stephen Sommers' *The Mummy* and *Uncharted* (the games). Sadly, despite some winning elements, this old-school, globe-trotting, MacGuffin-hunting expedition ends up more *Sahara*, or *The Mummy Returns*, or *Uncharted* (the movie).

It's not for lack of trying. All the ingredients are here: a wisecracking American adventurer in John Krasinski's unfortunately named Luke Purdue; a find-the-clues quest that takes in historical artefacts; a trek across the globe that goes from sunken shipwrecks to contraption-filled pyramids; a long-lost mythological wonder to unearth (the Fountain of Youth, duh). But it never gels in the way that it should, with a join-the-dots narrative that's more functional than fun, and disappointingly bland characters.

Ritchie — on a bonkers streak right now, this being his seventh film in six years, on top of several TV series — is at least having a good time, trading hardman-geezer tropes for broader blockbusterdom without losing his trademark energy. He swings the camera around during the action without losing clarity, delivers pacy set-pieces, and plumps for practical stunts throughout. One sequence, involving a ship raised from the ocean floor, was clearly filmed on a massive water-sloshing set, while location shooting includes Vienna, Bangkok, London and Cairo. Within the opening 15 minutes alone, you get a bike chase, a train brawl and an art heist.

But there's a hole at the centre of it all. John Krasinski has always been charismatic, with oodles of affable charm. But he's fundamentally miscast here; simply put, he's too *nice* to be believable as a rugged, cocky, fortune-and-glory hunter. As a result, his Luke Purdue (get it? He's lost!) is no Indiana Jones, nor a Rick O'Connell; not convincing in selfish-arsehole mode (a key facet of the character), nor wide-eyed enough when coming face-to-face with long-lost pieces of history. Natalie Portman brings a bit of verve to Luke's sister Charlotte, reluctantly pulled into the adventure while muddling through a divorce, but the two never ring true as siblings.

Without a strong core of characters (Eiza González is wildly underserved; Domhnall Gleeson barely registers), *Fountain Of Youth*'s promising adventure elements become just... stuff. There's no sense of awe as Luke and his underwritten crew near the Fountain; the banter feels forced and leaden throughout; even the crisp photography feel a bit soulless, a digital lens on an analogue genre. It might look the part, but on closer inspection, it's hollow — a forgery of the real deal. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT **Given all the elements involved, *Fountain Of Youth* should be a blast. That it isn't is a real disappointment. Maybe best left buried.**

also out

HEAD TO EMPIREONLINE.COM TO READ THESE REVIEWS IN FULL

CLEANER

★★ FILM

"The action feels so slight, especially compared to the ambitious set-pieces of director Martin Campbell's Bond entries. This British attempt at a *Die Hard* ends up just being a bit of a mess. Yippee-ki-nay." **JOHN NUGENT**

UNTIL DAWN

★★ FILM

"It leans hard into the generic, playing all the horror hits we've seen before and leaving you waiting desperately for the moment it'll take things up a notch. What should have been a twisty ride ends up feeling like it's bursting at the seams to move up a gear — but never does." **HARRY STAINER**

SIRENS

★★★★ TV

"Yes, it's trashy, but deliberately so, using camp twists to keep us on our toes while digging deeper into uncomfortable truths. A deranged look into the strange dynamic formed between three women who are far too close for their own good." **DAVID OPIE**

THE WEDDING BANQUET

★★ FILM

"Though pitched as a romcom, in reality it's an out-and-out drama, the occasional injections of slapstick feeling out of step with the overall tone. It's always a pleasure to see queer love stories, but this doesn't live up to its potential." **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

HURRY UP TOMORROW

★★ FILM

"Despite some woozy visuals and a soundtrack of chart-topping music, there's not much to recommend this clichéd pop-star drama — unless you're a big fan of The Weeknd." **GAVIA BAKER-WHITELAW**

Fantastic Science
with
Mr Fantastic

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

AFTER SOME SPLUTTERED PREVIOUS INCARNATIONS – AND SOME CORPORATE STUMBLING BLOCKS – MARVEL'S FIRST FAMILY ARE FINALLY JOINING THE MCU. WILL THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS HERALD A BRIGHT NEW ERA FOR SUPERHERO CINEMA? LET'S GO TO SPACE...

The Fantastic Four are preparing to launch.

"How long to get Excelsior launch-ready?" asks Reed Richards (Pedro Pascal) of the Fantastic Four's spaceship, pacing with urgency. "Twenty hours," replies Ben Grimm (Ebon Moss-Bachrach). Sue Storm (Vanessa Kirby), heavily pregnant, springs into action. "We have to make a statement," she says. "We need to get ahead of this." Meanwhile, Johnny Storm (Joseph Quinn) is looking pensive: "The herald" — referring to the mysterious shiny alien the Silver Surfer — "spoke to me in her language," he says. An intergalactic threat is looming. The cosmos is calling.

It's 9 September, 2024. *Empire* stands in Reed Richards' laboratory at the top of the Baxter Building, the midtown Manhattan skyscraper that has always been the home of the Fantastic Four, aka Marvel's 'First Family'. More accurately, we're on the S Stage at Pinewood Studios in Buckinghamshire, just one of several studios and outdoor sets commandeered at the facility for the mammoth production of *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, the superhero team's long-awaited entry into the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

The lab set is vast and cavernous, all bold colours and mid-century chic, with vaulted ceilings and giant, eye-shaped windows. There's a huge, curved blackboard — wide enough for someone with stretchy powers, perhaps? — covered in mathematical chalk scribbles; an engineering section for inventions; and a full-blown NASA-style space-mission control, covered in blinking lights, computer data and star charts. The helper robot H.E.R.B.I.E. zips about, puppeteered by a crew member. And, most tellingly, four spacesuits hang by the door.

In case the Neil Armstrong-coded title didn't give you a hint, this is very much a space movie. "The Fantastic Four are, first and foremost, scientists, explorers, adventurers, and astronauts," says director Matt Shakman, who has set the film in a unique retro-futuristic alt-1960s. "They are passionate about exploration. They are part of this JFK-inspired

Clockwise from main: It's a family affair: Ben Grimm/ The Thing (Ebon Moss-Bachrach), Reed Richards/ Mister Fantastic (Pedro Pascal), Johnny Storm/ Human Torch (Joseph Quinn) and Sue Storm/ Invisible Woman (Vanessa Kirby); Johnny Storm makes a giant leap; Director Matt Shakman on set; Reed Richards with his helper robot H.E.R.B.I.E..

optimism: 'We do these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.'"

Making a Fantastic Four film has, traditionally, been very hard indeed: every one of the previous films has been less than fantastic, so much so that some speculated a successful adaptation was beyond reach. It is Marvel's super-powered white whale. And Marvel recognises the challenge. "This is our opportunity to put them on Mount Rushmore, as they should be," says executive producer Grant Curtis of the Four.

"I think," says Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige simply, "that there are no four characters that are more important for the history of Marvel."

Launch day is finally approaching. Seventeen years since the Marvel Cinematic Universe began, Marvel's First Family are coming home. Can the Fantastic Four do the impossible: break the curse, finally make a good film from a comic classic — and usher in a bold, optimistic new era for the MCU?

"In the beginning... Marvel said, 'Let there be The Fantastic Four'... And Marvel saw The Fantastic Four. And it was good." Thus wrote the comic's co-creator and writer Stan Lee, with his typical grandiosity, in the 1974 book *Origins Of Marvel Comics*. The Fantastic Four are the rock on which Stan Lee and Jack Kirby built their church: in 1961, the company was not the multi-billion-dollar money-printing machine they are now. "Marvel was on its ass, literally," is how the FF's co-creator and artist Jack Kirby later recalled it. Lee, for his part, was almost ready to quit the business. As a last gasp, they decided to try something new.

The Fantastic Four #1 went on sale in November 1961. There was nothing like it on the newsstands at the time: more grounded and grown-up than the comics of its era, yet cosmic and colourful and mythological. It sold like Human-Torch-flamed hot cakes. "People ›

were wowed by the wonder and the wit," says Shakman, "but they were completely in love with the messiness of the family. That's the cornerstone of this comic book, and that's essential to the movie."

The first comic established their origin story in typically succinct fashion. The Four — Dr Reed Richards, his fiancée Sue Storm, her teenage brother Johnny, and Reed's gruff best pal Ben Grimm — journey into space "before the commies beat us", as Sue puts it (this was a Cold War-era comic, remember). There, they are hit by cosmic rays, which bestow them respective superpowers of stretchiness (Reed, earning the moniker 'Mister Fantastic'), invisibility (Sue, the 'Invisible Woman'), fire (Johnny, the 'Human Torch'), and a giant indestructible rock body (Ben, 'The Thing').

The comic has been a consistent bestseller ever since. Yet it has never had much luck in being adapted. There have been a handful of animated TV shows (including a bizarre 1979 crossover with *The Flintstones*, entitled *Fred And Barney Meet The Thing*). There was an early '90s Roger Corman B-movie, never officially released. There were two early 2000s films, directed by Tim Story, in Fox's own mini Marvel universe — goofy fun but now dated. And there was the ill-fated Josh Trank-directed 2015 reboot, unwisely titled *Fant4stic*, which was a critical and box-office bomb, leading one reviewer to ponder: "Maybe *Fantastic Four* is a cursed property — or maybe just one that shouldn't be turned into a film?"

"I was around for those early *Fantastic Four* movies," Feige says now, wearing a blue *F4* baseball cap (he was executive producer on the two Tim Story films). "And like all of the pre-MCU movies, I learned a lot. I always thought, if we ever got creative autonomy ourselves, we might do things a little differently." Back then, studios and filmmakers weren't yet confident that audiences could embrace the comic-book tone or colour. "It was a different time," continues Feige. "There was still a bit of fear of being silly."

And then something unexpected happened. In 2019, Disney purchased Fox for a colossal $71 billion, bringing with them the rights to a clutch of characters that Marvel Studios and the MCU previously had no access to. "When Disney bought Fox, it was really an unexpected dream come true," says Feige. "It came at the perfect time, to help us launch into a new era. They are Marvel's First Family, and I really wanted to do them justice."

Enter Matt Shakman. While Jon Watts, the director of Tom Holland's *Spider-Man* trilogy, was briefly attached to the new MCU-sanctioned *Fantastic Four*, it was Shakman — a veteran of sitcoms (*It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia*), prestige telly (*Game Of Thrones*) and Marvel (*WandaVision*) — who steered the film in its final direction, and pushed for the novel retro-futuristic setting. A setting that placed the team in their own world: not Earth-616, as Marvel likes to designate its main timeline, but another strand of the multiverse entirely.

That approach extended to the methods of working, with an emphasis on practical effects over the usual superhero-stock-in-trade of green screens and CGI. "I wanted it to feel tactile and real, the way they would have done it in the '60s," Shakman says. It might look and feel like a different *Fantastic Four*. But the filmmakers argue this is, in fact, the most comics-accurate film version yet. And Feige says his mission was simply to honour the comics: "I was looking for classic *Fantastic Four* energy."

So how do you find a classic Mister Fantastic? Where do you go when you need the smartest man in the universe? Simple: you find the galaxy's best Space Dad.

A quarter of a century before they were Fantastic-friends, Pedro Pascal was very nearly roommates with Matt Shakman. In 1999, they were both young actors simply trying to get their first professional gig. "He came over to check out my two-bedroom flat, and he was like, 'No, thank you,'" Pascal chuckles. "I think he met his wife because of where he ended up moving to. So, he had his own destiny to attend to."

There is destiny etched into the very spandex of this role, hearing it from Pascal. The buzzier-than-ever actor is hardly a stranger to blockbuster franchises, from *Game Of Thrones* to *The Mandalorian*. There was, he says, initial reluctance to join another one. "I wasn't sceptical at all of this as a piece," he says. "But I was sceptical over [Shakman's] choice to cast me. I was questioning if I would serve it as best

Facing page, far left: Galactus' herald: Shalla-Bal/Silver Surfer (Julia Garner). **Facing page, right, top to bottom:** Human Torch in action; Solid as a rock: The Thing; Sue Storm, fully Fantastic-ed; Storms brewing. **This page, top to bottom:** Johnny gets creative; Taking Liberty: Galactus (Ralph Ineson).

as it was meant to be served — to be convincing as an astrophysicist, as a father, a husband."

He was weighing all this up while walking through New York with a friend, when he happened upon a young girl selling lemonade from a stand. "She ropes us in," he recalls. "And then I hear someone say, 'What are you doing here?' And I look up and it's Matt. The lemonade sales-girl is his daughter. My friend was like, 'Well, I guess you're doing it.'" Just as there were cosmic rays in Reed Richards' origin story, there seems to be some strange cosmic force at play with Pascal's. "I definitely think it was destiny," he says.

But it was Pascal's range that won him the role, Shakman explains. "I was looking for an actor who could contain multitudes," he says. "There's the very cerebral Reed Richards, and then there's the action hero, the leader, the husband, the father, the friend. I knew Pedro could do all of that." It would be a stretch — ahem — for any actor, but Pascal "loved thinking about how lonely that would be," he says. "He does the ultimate version of catastrophising — a brain that has an overview of threats on a mathematical level, but also being emotionally available. It was a fascinating contradiction." Still, he was stirred not just by who he was playing, "but who I was playing *with*."

In fact, Pascal was the final family member to be cast. Ebon Moss-Bachrach was the first, as Ben Grimm. He recognised the significance of the role, and how important it was to Jack Kirby. "I'm a New Yorker," Moss-Bachrach says. "Kirby's a New Yorker. He's a Lower East Side guy. A lot of this character was a homage to his father, and that, to me, is very meaningful. It made me feel an extra responsibility to show up." That responsibility extended to his "collaborative" performance; unlike the Michael Chiklis era, this Thing is rendered entirely in CGI. "It's a little bit heady to think about all the hundreds of people that are helping animate this character," he says. "I just had faith that they would make my performance so much cooler. I'm very, very happy with the way Ben looks."

It is a complicated process to bring Ol' Clobberer to life. "We went out to the desert and found a rock that looked exactly how we thought The Thing should look," explains Shakman, "and we filmed it in every single shot that The Thing appears in in the movie, under every lighting environment." On set, *Empire* witnesses this process: first, Moss-Bachrach's motion capture; then that desert rock (nicknamed 'Jennifer') filmed for lighting ›

the fantastic maw

PLANETS GALACTUS HAS MUNCHED

ARCHEOPIA

(*THOR* #162, 1969)

Everybody remembers their first — and Galactus is no different. Feeling peckish after being rudely awaken from his centuries-long slumber, The Devourer Of Worlds tucked into the prosperous planet of Archeopia to kickstart his quite literally killer diet plan. Fun fact: Prior to this, Big G only actually ate dead planets.

POPPUP

(*FANTASTIC FOUR* #175, 1976)

Even a cosmic deity isn't invulnerable to indigestion. During one of Galactus' many, *many* face-offs with the Fantastic Four, the Impossible Man — disguised as Sue Storm — tricked the purple-bonced baddie into eating his homeworld, Poppup. Thing is, Poppup's infinite energy supply overfeeds Galactus, giving him a (seemingly) lethal bad tummy.

TARNAX IV

(*FANTASTIC FOUR* #257, 1983)

Ever had a life-changing meal? How about a universe-changing one? When a dying Galactus chowed down on the Skrull throneworld of Tarnax IV, little could he have known that in saving his own life, he was also setting the stage for the Kree/Skrull conflict that would spawn Marvel's canon-redefining *Secret Invasion*.

KRYO, VANYSH IVII, SYLUS, IO-X4 & CLYPSE

(*THOR* #730, 2020)

To attain his most powerful form, it took Galactus a five-course buffet comprising planets whose energies were so unique, even loyal herald Silver Surfer kept their locations secret. But when universe-ending threat the Black Winter emerged, Galactus boshed all five of 'em to bulk up for their almighty scrap. (Somehow, he *still* lost.) **JORDAN KING**

references; and finally, a stand-in wearing a full-sized Thing costume, in what must be the strangest job in modern filmmaking.

Next to be cast was Vanessa Kirby. "I'm such a Sue nerd," she says, recalling her first meeting at Marvel, "I think I out-nerded everyone in that room." Kirby loved the real science that grounded Sue's powers. "I got *so* into quantum physics," she laughs. "It's sad how much I got into it. I could waffle on about cellular vibration frequency." Shakman describes Sue as "the inspiring, idealistic, leader of what the Fantastic Four represents, as she is in some of the later comic runs. She's essentially the Secretary-General of the UN."

Then came Joseph Quinn, who had history with Shakman; the latter had cast him in a tiny role in a Season 7 episode of *Game Of Thrones*. "I did a little kind of cough and a spit," is how Quinn remembers his episode (he played a guard at Winterfell who tells Arya Stark to "fuck off"). "I was impressed by him," Shakman recalls, "and thought, 'Someday I'll work with him again.' I was interested in a Johnny Storm who was more than just a ladies' man and adrenaline junkie" — alluding to Chris Evans' swaggering, macho portrayal in the Tim Story films.

"I was looking for somebody who could be a dreamer," continues Shakman. "And I think Joe is an incredibly alive, spontaneous actor." Though the emphasis on practical effects did not quite extend here. "I tried that on day one," deadpans Quinn. "I turned up doused in gasoline, and Pedro was chasing me around with a match."

A three-week rehearsal period helped fire up the familial chemistry. On set, in-between takes, *Empire* experiences this. In the cast tent, music blares from a Bluetooth speaker as Pascal throws some shapes. "Sorry, it's our dance break now," he says, mid-boogie. "I can hear the Pedro noises from over there," says Kirby, joining the party. A small disco-ball spins in the corner. It's a good vibe.

This is an essential flavour to this particular story, they all agree. "Like with any family, there's times you want to kill them," says Quinn, "but I love them to death. I would take a bullet for all three of them." He pauses and considers this. "That's a bit dramatic. But I love them dearly. You can't force this stuff."

The human-level stuff is covered, then. But making a film of this size requires the micro and the macro. The mega-macro, even. "Directing something of this scale," acknowledges Shakman, "you're always looking at it from the three-inch view and the 30,000-foot view." On any other film, that might seem like an exaggeration. Not when you have a Galactus in the mix.

Back in the Baxter Building lab, Reed Richards is looking anxiously at some star charts, and coming to a horrifying conclusion: there seems to be a planet missing. He gestures to holograms that will be added later in post-production.

Right: Richards gets busy in his super-powered lab. **Far right:** And is primed and ready.

"This is Proxima Delphi. A system with a planet similar to our own. Which as you can see... is now gone."

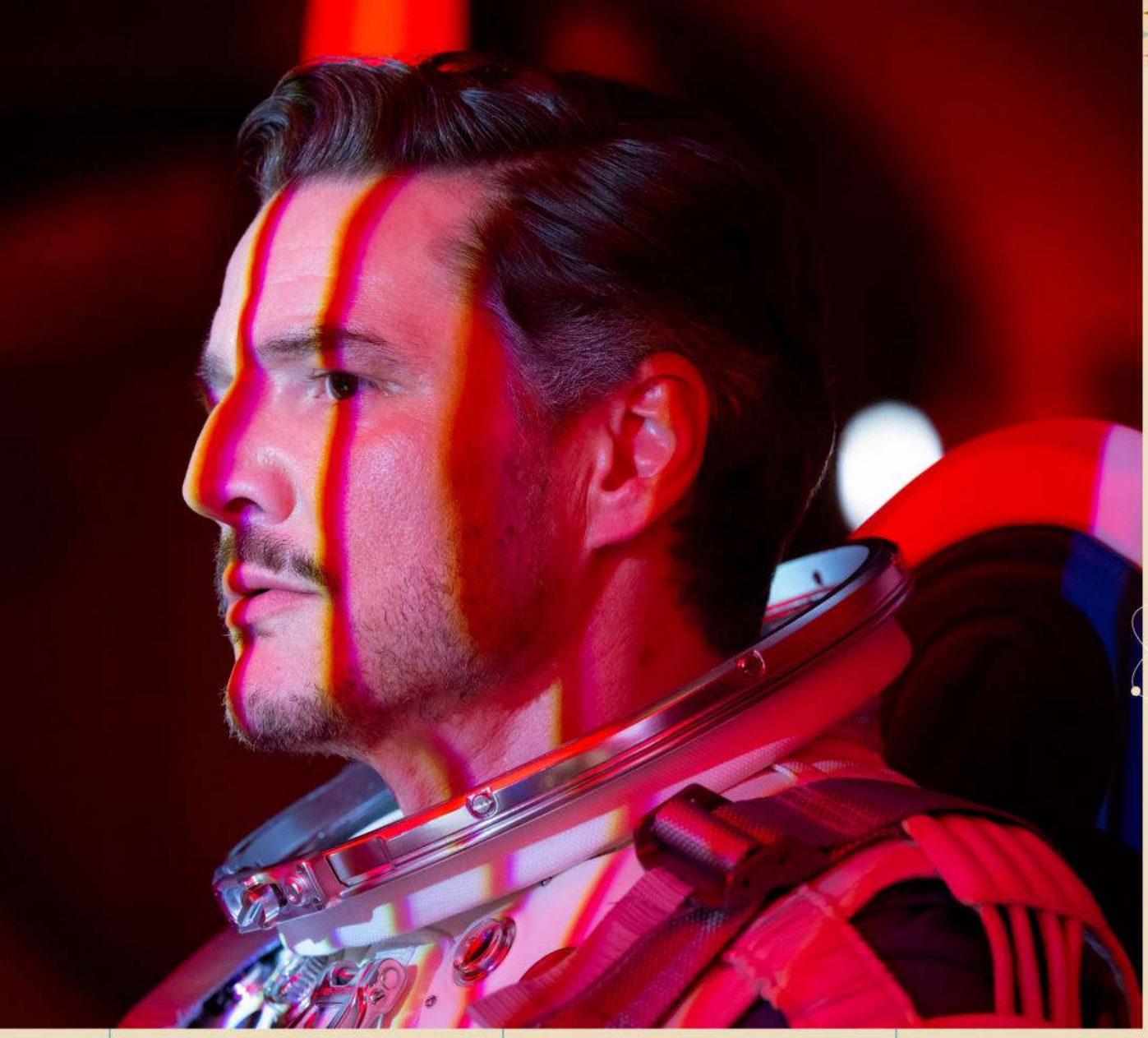
In Marvel's vast rogues' gallery, there are few foes quite as formidable as Galactus, "a humongous, 14-billion-year-old, planet-devouring cosmic vampire", as Shakman describes him. "The coming of Galactus is one of the greatest comic-book stories ever written," asserts Feige. Last time the character was seen on screen, in 2007's *Rise Of The Silver Surfer*, many fans were outraged when the character took the form of a puffy, gaseous cloud. "In another time, some might consider the notion of somebody with a big, angular helmet walking through a city goofy," says Feige. "I consider it *awesome*."

There is a clear effort to stop getting Galactus wrong, as Alan Partridge might put it. That angular helmet is rendered practically as much as possible, with Ralph Ineson, the bassy-voiced Yorkshireman playing the character, wearing a full costume "two-thirds" of filming days, versus a third in motion capture.

To Ineson, this cosmic being should not even be thought of as a supervillain — he's just a bit peckish. "The concepts of bad and good are not really relevant to someone like him," Ineson says. "He's a cosmic force. He's a god, of sorts." (Ineson is firm on the question of who is worse, Galactus or the *other* iconic baddie in his filmography, Chris 'Finchy' Finch from *The Office*. "I don't think Galactus is evil," Ineson says with a straight face. "But Finchy's a proper cunt.")

How does one get into the mind of a character so far removed from the morality of humans? And we're not talking about Finchy now. "I was thinking about scale," says Ineson. He drove through the tunnel under Mont Blanc, "a few times, bizarrely, just imagining that as his windpipe and his trachea. I also went to a lot of tall buildings. We went to a wedding at the top of the Gherkin building in London, and I spent most of the afternoon just staring out, ruminating. I got in trouble with my wife — she was like, 'You've got to say hello to the bride and groom at some point!'"

As per the comics, Galactus' arrival is announced by his herald, the Silver Surfer,



Centre strip, top to bottom: Sue Storm in pensive mood; The Thing: useful if you want to avoid a ticket; Zero G antics; I got you babe: new parents Reed and Sue have even more at stake.

a metal-skinned alien who travels the cosmos at incredible speeds on a magic surfboard. Traditionally the moniker belongs to the character Norrin Radd, but in this film it is Shalla-Bal, Norrin's sometime lover, played here by Julia Garner. "She's silver and shiny and tells depressing information to the Fantastic Four," explains Garner. "And then just storms off. She plays cat and mouse with them a little."

Rendered almost entirely in CGI, it made for a surreal job for Garner. "I had a whole day of motion capture where I was just doing these surf positions," she remembers. "Sometimes they were like, 'Pretend like you're surfing super-chill. Now, surf super-aggressively.' It was very strange. I kind of loved it." Garner does not consider herself much of a surfer in real life — "I'm so pale, the beach doesn't like me," she admits — but she did take counsel from surfer friends. "They showed me how to stand on a board. But I also used the comic books as inspiration for the different poses — like a Michelangelo sculpture."

How, exactly, the Four take on an ancient destroyer of worlds and its surfing herald remains to be seen. But there may be an ace up their sleeves. "It's not just adults that have superpowers," teases Kirby.

In the comics, Reed Richards and Sue Storm have two children. Their first, Franklin Richards, is a reality-bending mutant who can conjure entire universes at will. The second, Valeria Richards, is an interdimensional time-traveller with super-genius intelligence. Not a conventional family unit, then.

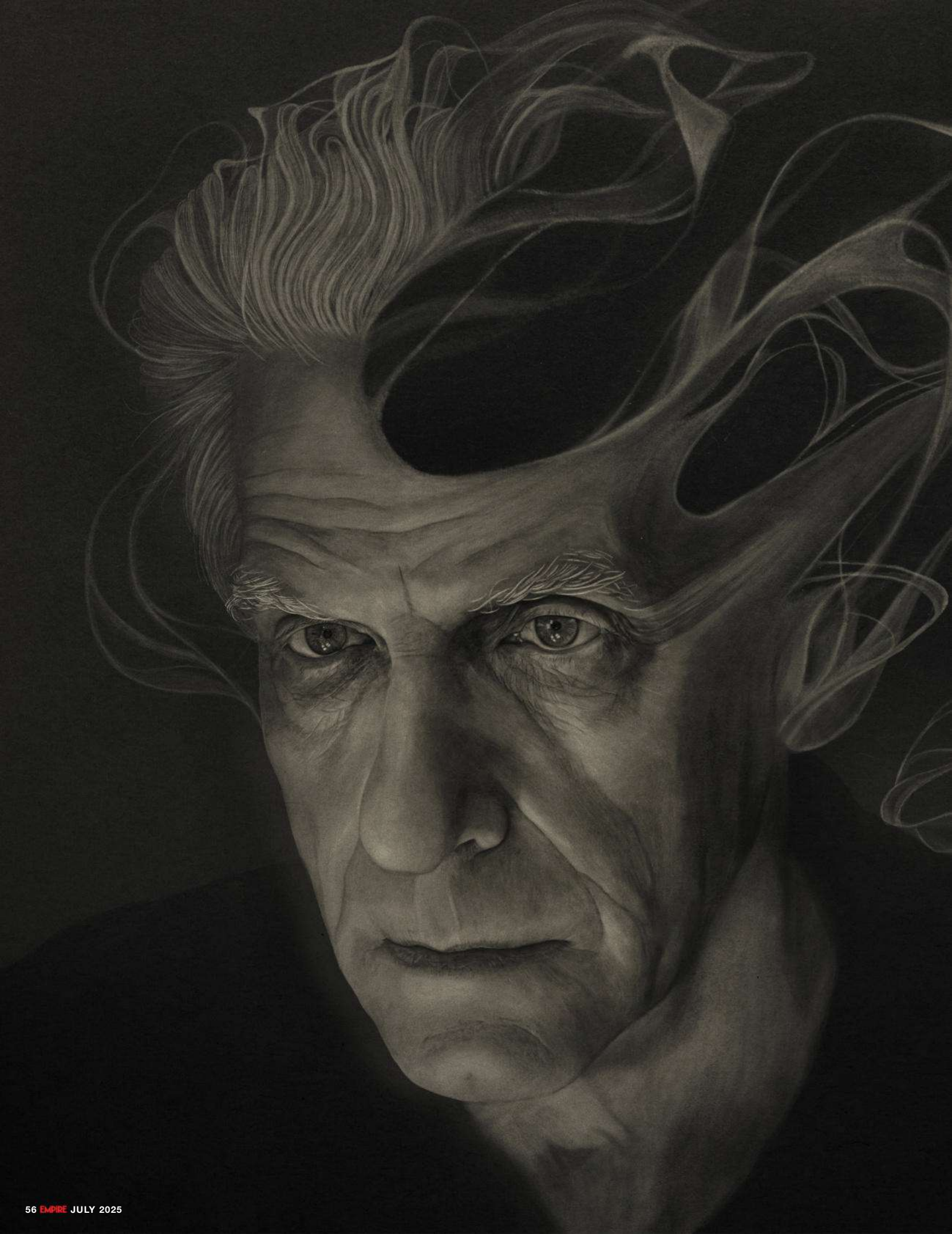
Nobody working on the film will be drawn on the exact identity of Sue and Reed's child in the film. But as that title suggests, it runs at the very core of this story. As Vanessa Kirby notes: "It feels unusual, in a Marvel movie, that there's a birth in the middle of it. We're having to risk things for this baby. The questions in this movie feel like fundamental human ones."

Whether or not the film will feature universe-warping super-sprogs, the events of *First Steps* will have huge implications for the rest of the Marvel universe. The official line is that Robert Downey Jr's Doctor Doom, due to appear in next year's *Avengers: Doomsday* and traditionally the Fantastic Four's most infamous foe, is Sir Not-Appearing-In-This-Movie. "Doom is not a part of my film," asserts Shakman, "and therefore not a part of my purview."

What we definitively do know — thanks to a series of chairs, gradually unveiled on Marvel's YouTube channel back in March — is that the Fantastic Four will return. They will be a major part of *Doomsday*, and the MCU going forward. In fact, they have already technically arrived — making a brief appearance in the post-credits of *Thunderbolts**, a ship with a 4 emblazoned on the side, entering Earth's dimension. "Well," says Feige cryptically when asked if that is indeed the Excelsior, "the name of their ship is the Excelsior, and there is a Fantastic Four ship entering the MCU in the tag. But I'm not sure they're the same ship."

Beyond that: there are decades of Fantastic Four comics still to be adapted. Every Marvel casting usually involves a multi-film, multi-year commitment, and the cast seem eager to delve deeper into their characters, to enjoy a complex and varied arc to come. "I see a limitless amount of layers to this character," says Pascal, excitedly. "Oh my God, there's so much," agrees Kirby. "I feel like we've only just begun." The Fantastic Four's inherent optimism, messiness, decency, squabbles and love could galvanise the wider MCU for years to come. Flame on!

***THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 25 JULY**



WORDS
JAMIE GRAHAM

PETER STRAIN

FOR DECADES, **DAVID CRONENBERG** HAS TAKEN US ON BOUNDARY-BREAKING, TABOO-BUSTING JOURNEYS. AND WITH HIS NEW, HUGELY PERSONAL FILM ***THE SHROUDS***, HE SHOWS NO SIGN OF LETTING UP

David Cronenberg doesn't do polite chit-chat.

He's softly spoken and well-mannered, certainly, but the 82-year-old Canadian auteur prefers to get straight to the big stuff. Why waste time nattering about the weather when you can ponder human frailty, decay, mutations, psychosis and disease?

Right now, he's pondering his own death. "There's a stretch of sidewalk in Toronto called the Walk Of Fame, and there's a plaque for me," he begins, talking to *Empire* from his home in said city. His shock of grey-white hair stands upright as if in fear of what he's about to say. "I often think, 'I could be buried under that plaque, and there could be a Plexiglas slab put over it, so that people could look at my body.' They would walk along and go, 'Oh, there's David. He's coming along quite well.'"

Death, of course, infects all of Cronenberg's work. His 1975 debut *Shivers* gave us burrowing, slug-like parasites that turn their human hosts into violent nymphomaniacs. *The Fly* saw a brilliant molecular physicist transform into a gloopy winged insect. J.G. Ballard adaptation *Crash* coolly observed the numb survivor of a car collision discovering sexual arousal in mangled metal, scarred flesh and gaping wounds. His work picks obsessively at the same scabs: physical and mental transformation, the effects of technology on body and mind, and transgressive sexuality.

His sombre, 21st movie, *The Shrouds*, follows Karsh (Vincent Cassel), an entrepreneur whose invention, GraveTech, allows mourners to watch their loved ones decompose in the coffin — in 8K. A widower, Karsh finds solace in peering at his own wife's remains, but spirals into conspiracy and paranoia when the high-tech graveyard is ransacked and hacked. And it's personal: *The Shrouds* sees the director wrestle with the 2017 death of his wife of 38 years, film editor Carolyn Zeifman.

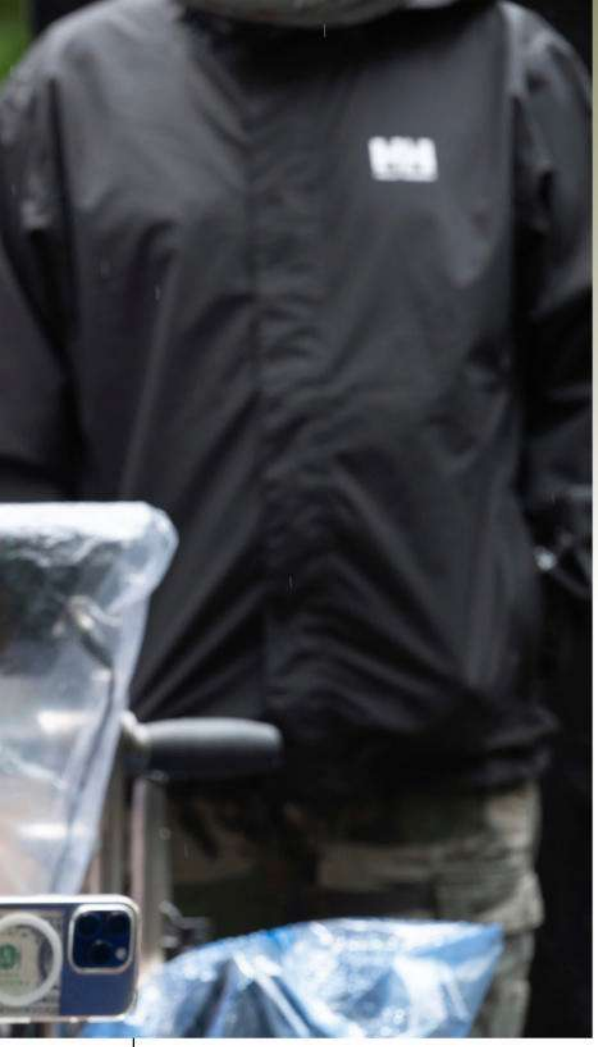
"I always assumed I would die first, because I'm a man and our life expectancy is lower, and because she was seven years younger," says Cronenberg. "It never occurred to me that I would have to deal with this." Well, he's done it on screen, and he's now ready to discuss his grief — and how the film chimes with themes he regularly returns to. No small talk...

Death

"Grief is rotting your teeth"
– Dr Hofstra, *The Shrouds*

The catalyst for *The Shrouds* was the moment that Cronenberg felt a strong impulse to crawl inside the coffin at his wife's funeral. It was an urge that took him by surprise, and one that he had not experienced at either one of his parents' funerals. "They were both cremated, so that was never a possibility — you don't desire to join them in the oven where their bodies are being burnt," he says. "Your relationship to your parents when you're little is quite physical and bodily — you're clinging to them — but a partner in love, and sex, is a very different relationship. You know that body in a way you don't know the body of your parents. It's a different kind of grief."

Cronenberg's movies are rife with death. But he's never before examined grief so directly. The nearest, perhaps, is 1979's *The Brood*, in which he dealt with the break-up of his first marriage, to sound recordist Margaret Hindson, by (mis)shaping it into a tale of divorce, insanity and murderous mutant children born of rage. In a most icky way. You might think that he would have found catharsis in the making of *The Brood* and *The Shrouds*, but he offers a firm shake of the head. "No, and I didn't expect *The Shrouds* to do that for me," he asserts. "I don't think that art is therapy. Not for the person creating the art. It might have some therapeutic value for the person who is exposed to the art."



Clockwise from main: David Cronenberg in action on the set of new movie *The Shrouds*, one of his most personal works; Giving us the ick in *The Fly* (1986); Candice Carveth (Cindy Hinds) in peril in 1979's *The Brood*; Widower Karsh Relikh (Vincent Cassel) surveys graveyard destruction in *The Shrouds*; The film's modified, techie take on the usual burial sheet.

In the film, Karsh's deceased wife Becca (Diane Kruger, who also plays Becca's identical twin sister Terry, allowing for some *Dead Ringers*-style confusion and complexity) appears to him in dreams/reveries. Naked, she is scarred and missing her left arm and breast after surgery. These scenes are so honest and raw that Kruger has stated she was worried for Cronenberg watching them on a monitor in the next room.

"Not at all," he insists when asked if it was painful to relive such memories. "Once you start to write the screenplay, you've automatically segued into the area of fiction, even if there are lines of dialogue which were actually spoken by me or my wife. By the time you get on the film set, you are no longer dealing with the reality of your life; you are dealing with making this movie. And you need that distance, that objectivity. You can't be sobbing, curled up in a foetal position, while your actors are trying to get their lines right."

Technology

"It's the reshaping of the human body by modern technology"
— Dr Robert Vaughan, *Crash*

The technology in Cronenberg's latest consists of metallic shrouds equipped with MRI-style scanners. Wrapped around the corpse, they broadcast high-resolution, interactive 3D images that can be viewed either on a screen embedded in the gravestone, or on your smartphone through the GraveTech app.

Technology is a staple of Cronenberg's work, the director considering it so much a part of human existence and our relentless quest for advancement that it's often fused with flesh. Think James Woods' Max Renn in *Videodrome* inserting a cassette into the orifice in his abdomen. Or the techno-biological pods with umbilical-cord leads that are plugged directly into gamers' spinal columns in *eXistenZ*. Or Jeff Goldblum's Brundlefly fusing with the teleportation pod at the end of *The Fly*.

"For me, technology is a projection of the human body and mind," Cronenberg explains. "It doesn't come from outer space like in the '40s and '50s, where it was always alien technology. It's very human. So it will have these negative, murderous elements because we have those elements."

Cronenberg's movies sometimes have a near-future dystopian vibe to them, the out-there tech made to further feel the stuff of science-fiction by cool, sleek lensing and hypnotic scores (*The Shrouds*' is wrapped in an electronic drone, courtesy of regular composer Howard Shore). But the filmmaker insists that reviewers are wrong to locate his movies on the horizon.

"Some reviews mentioned the sinister futurist element of *The Shrouds*, and I thought, 'Oh, that's interesting,' because for me, it was ›

just reporting what is absolutely happening now. If somebody wanted to do that, it wouldn't be difficult. Cameras, lights and a grave — what's the problem? In most of my films, I've recorded what is happening now."

Like *Videodrome*, in which Renn, the producer of a sleazy cable station, stumbles across a hyperviolent torture show originating from Malaysia, *The Shrouds* concerns itself with voyeurism and how reality can be filtered and distorted by screens. And as with *Rabid*, *The Brood*, *Scanners*, *eXistenZ* and *Eastern Promises*, *The Shrouds* obsesses over shadowy institutes and corporations. It's been said that Stephen King's novel *The Dead Zone* — adapted by Cronenberg in 1983 — predicted the rise of Donald Trump, but perhaps Cronenberg's work also contains the seed of Trump's relationship with tech giant Elon Musk.

"The combination of Trump and Musk is incredibly potent and quite strange and really interesting," he says. "I wouldn't have anticipated they'd be partners in crime. You could ask ChatGPT to create a novel in the style of Philip K. Dick, starring Trump and Musk. You'd have an interesting novel there. Maybe I'd make a movie of it." Just thinking of it makes the head explode.

Body Horror

"We've all wanted to see an autopsy, haven't we?"
— Caprice, *Crimes Of The Future*

Cronenberg prefers the term 'body conflict', but his work has been repeatedly labelled 'body horror' since filmmaker/academic Philip Brophy used the term in his 1983 article 'Horrality: The Textuality Of The Contemporary Horror Film'. Critics often split Cronenberg's career into two halves — pre-*The Fly* and post-*The Fly* — with the earlier movies more concerned with physical decay, transformation and sick-making practical effects, and the later ones focusing on psychological matters.

2022's *Crimes Of The Future* was heralded as the return of 'Dave Deprave' to body horror, presenting as it did a not-too-distant future in which humans undergo bodily mutations as they adapt to a synthetic environment. "Surgery is the new sex," declares Kristen Stewart's skittish bureaucrat Timlin, turned on by Viggo Mortensen's performance artist Tenser having his neo-organs removed in public. And Cronenberg is at it again in *The Shrouds* — as if Karsh viewing his wife's decomposition isn't enough, he then spies some peculiar nodules growing on her bones.

"I'm an atheist," declares Cronenberg, who in 1963 studied Biochemistry at the University of Toronto before switching to English Language and Literature the next year. "When our bodies die, we are gone. For me, that is the reality. And as a filmmaker, what is it that you film the most? It's the human body. That's our subject, and when you factor in Bernard Shaw's saying, 'Conflict is the essence of drama', then you get body conflict. Bodies in conflict with each other — violence, shooting, whatever — but also conflict within the body. It has to do with my understanding of the human condition."

Cronenberg himself doesn't see a distinction between his early and later work, quickly pointing out that he would have made *Dead Ringers*, the film he did immediately after *The Fly*, ten years earlier if he could have got the funding, and that the brain is simply a part of the body anyway. But he does concede that he keeps circling the same themes. "It's only when critics say it that I'm forced to acknowledge it," he stresses. "I don't think about it [as I make the movies]. I allow my imagination and intuition to take me to wherever it's going to take me."

Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Sex

"Even dying is an act of eroticism"
— Nurse Forsythe, *Shivers*

Hollywood has taught us that sex is soft music, softer lighting and mutual orgasms. Cronenberg knows otherwise. In *Shivers* and *Rabid*, voracious sexual activity and the disease it spreads threaten to bring about societal breakdown, but rather than see this as a bad thing, Cronenberg suggests just how thrilling and liberating it might be.

"For Freud, civilisation is repression," he explains. "You can't have civilisation without

Clockwise from left: Cronenberg and James Woods lighten things up between takes on *Videodrome* (1983); *The Fly*; *Crimes Of The Future* (2022); *A History Of Violence* (2005); *Crash* (1996).

Caitlin Cronenberg, Getty Images, Imago, MPTV, Vertigo Releasing

the repression of certain urges. One is violence and competitiveness and possessiveness — if every person acted on those instincts, there would be nothing but chaos and murder. And one of the forces that is primarily repressed is the sexual force. Sex is very disruptive of civilisation, and very animalistic, and basic. So those are the dynamics that are in my movies. I think that Freud was completely right about that."

Cronenberg's most notorious film may well be sex-and-wrecks drama *Crash*, with its mix of semen, sump-oil and S&M, its merging of man and machine. But sex is treated unblinkingly and intriguingly throughout his work: Tom and Edie (Mortensen and Maria Bello) having rough sex on the stairs in *A History Of Violence*, after she's alerted to his dark past; Jung (Michael Fassbender) spanking patient Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightley) in *A Dangerous Method*; the desire of Dr Hobbes (Fred Doederlein) to "turn the world into one beautiful, mindless orgy" in *Shivers*; and, in *The Shrouds*, Karsh dreaming of making love to his mutilated wife, with shocking results. In sex, says Cronenberg, people can cast off their fetters.

"That's one of the vitalising, invigorating aspects of sex, and why I think sex is very important to a healthy, vibrant life," he says. "It's so primordial. It's much more basic than anything that civilisation has built on top of it. So when you're having sex — if you're having good sex — it undermines and subverts civilisation, basically. And that's when people can let go of all other anxieties and structures and rules and regulations." He pauses. "A lot of people can't let go and maybe have a very restrained and tentative sex life. But sex is wild and savage, you know?" Yes, David, we've seen your movies.

Love

"Is this a romance we're having?"
— Seth Brundle, *The Fly*

Maybe it's because viewers can't see past the violence and viscera (not everyone will share the assertion of Jeremy Irons' Elliot Mantle, in *Dead Ringers*, that there should be "beauty contests for the insides of bodies"), but the importance of love in Cronenberg's films is often overlooked. Part of the emotional power of *The Dead Zone* is that the accident that befalls Johnny (Christopher Walken), putting him in a coma from which he emerges with psychic powers, disrupts the love story of Johnny and Sarah (Brooke Adams), while in *The Fly*, Ronnie (Geena Davis) cares deeply for Seth (Jeff Goldblum) even as he mutates into a 185 lb insect. Loving him means she must destroy him, just as *Crash*'s James Ballard (James Spader) tries to ram his wife Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger) off the road to fulfil her death wish.

Now more than ever, Cronenberg's films connect as love stories, his tales of kink, transformation, polyamory, queerness and connection in virtual spaces chiming with the move away from traditional, heteronormative views of the nuclear family. "I'm a romantic, really," he nods. "I've experienced love over many years and I believe in romantic love and I think it's an innately interesting subject because it varies so hugely from culture to culture in the way that it manifests itself. I don't know why people miss [love in my movies]. My actors understand it. They know that it's a love story."

It can't be a coincidence that Cronenberg's most commercially successful movie is *The Fly*, in which the (tragic) love story is front and centre. "I think it's taken quite a while for people to think of *The Fly* as a love story," he counters. "It wasn't obvious at the beginning. The disease is really the star of the movie. It's a tough sell: two very attractive people fall in love, he gets a hideous wasting disease, she helps him to die, and that's the end of the story. But if it's a sci-fi movie with some interesting technology and some horror elements, you can tell that story."

In *The Shrouds*, Karsh's love for his deceased wife is palpable. He, like Cronenberg, could not crawl into his wife's coffin, so he did the next best thing by inventing GraveTech. Whether it helps or hinders him is up for debate, but Cronenberg doesn't pause when asked if he would utilise GraveTech in the real world, should it exist.

"I would try it, yeah," he says. "I would try it with my wife."

***THE SHROUDS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 4 JULY**

Alternate Realities

FOUR MOVIES CRONENBERG ONCE WEIGHED UP

BEVERLY HILLS COP

In the early 1980s, Cronenberg was in contention for *Flashdance*, *Top Gun* and *Beverly Hills Cop* — the last, he said, "was sent my way when Sly Stallone was supposed to play the part". He dismissed all three as too mainstream, insisting that he'd only consider such movies if "I suddenly don't have anything to say".

TOTAL RECALL

Cronenberg, a Philip K. Dick fan, was at one point adapting his 1966 source story *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale*. Cronenberg's version would feature William Hurt, a big, glowing vagina and mutant, sewer-dwelling camels. He got his ass out of there, though, because, he said, the studio wanted "'*Raiders Of The Lost Ark* Goes To Mars'".

AMERICAN PSYCHO

Later, he wanted to tackle Bret Easton Ellis' 1991 shock-and-gore satire of '80s consumerism. Brad Pitt was attached as Patrick Bateman, and Ellis took on script duties, but creative differences brought down the axe. "He didn't want to shoot the violence," Ellis told *Rolling Stone*.

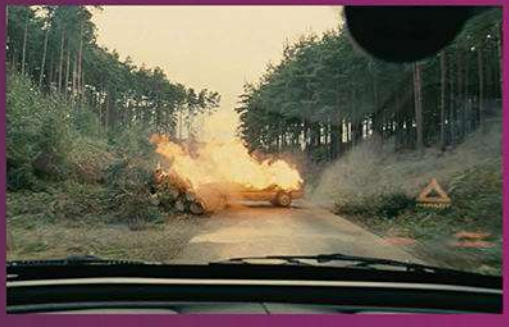
BASIC INSTINCT 2

Basic Instinct director Paul Verhoeven said the script for the sequel made him feel "sick". Step up, Cronenberg, though he exited a month before the shoot's start date. The press cited rows with returning star Sharon Stone. Reports that they involved an ice-pick and a water pistol loaded with STIs are unsubstantiated.

ONE SHOT TO RULE THEM ALL

WORDS **KYLE MACNEILL**

FOR DECADES, DIRECTORS HAVE BEEN IMMERSING US IN THE ACTION WITH DAZZLING, REAL-TIME, SINGLE-TAKE SEQUENCES.



NOW, WITH THE LIKES OF *ADOLESCENCE* UPPING THE ANTE, WE FIND OUT WHAT IT TAKES TO CAPTURE AN EPIC ONER

The horror of war recreated in real-time, for Sam Mendes' *1917* (2019).

The second episode of *The Studio*, Apple TV+'s biting industry satire, opens with misfiring studio boss Matt Remick (Seth Rogen) in a race against time. He's speeding towards a movie-set in his vintage Corvette convertible to make it for filming — all for just *one* shot. Specifically, a 'oner' — an extended scene with no cuts. Not that Sal Saperstein (Ike Barinholtz), Remick's spineless sidekick riding shotgun, is excited in the slightest. "Who cares if we miss the stupid magic-hour oner?" he whines. Remick does. "This shot is going to be epic," he says, before getting all schmaltzy. "The oner is the ultimate cinematic achievement. It's, like, the perfect marriage of artistry and technicality."

Remick isn't alone in his appreciation of the oner. Single-shot scenes — or, in some cases, entire films — are increasingly appearing on the small and big screen. Most movies rely on splicing together tons of cuts (a 2010 study found around 1,132 of them on average, apparently). But a few years back, with the likes of Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* and Sam Mendes' *1917*, a new wave of filmmakers began experimenting further with elongated shots, and going to new lengths to achieve them.

Today, a significant number of mainstream titles like *Adolescence*, *The Bear* and *Saturday Night* are ditching the scissors and keeping sections of drama unabridged, fulfilling a current desire for uninterrupted action. The oner has become water-cooler fodder.

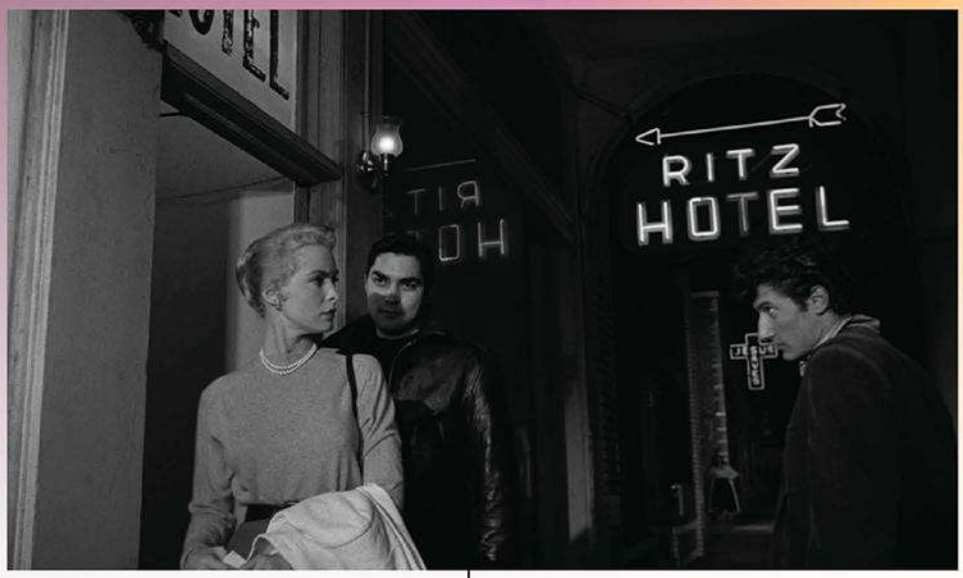
For Evan Goldberg, who created *The Studio* alongside Rogen (and directs it with him), the form has given him a shot of creative juice. After perfecting a heady strain of stoner comedy (from *Superbad* to *This Is the End*), he wanted to try something different. Coming up with the premise of the show, the duo began to meet, ironically, with lots of studio execs. They came across a recurring industry theme: panic. So they chose to shoot the bulk of *The Studio* in continuous format, enabling them to induce this same frenzied feeling for the audience. Including, obviously, the episode *about* filming a single-shot scene. "The joke, of course, when we came up with it, was that the whole episode would be a oner," says Goldberg. "We like meta!"

The technique may now be a topic of pastiche. But, for decades, it was a collector's item for sharp-eyed cinephiles.

The oner is hardly a cutting-edge phenomenon. Alfred Hitchcock was an early pioneer, and his 1948 psychological thriller *Rope* spliced together several ten-minute scenes to suggest a continuous sequence. In 1958, Orson Welles' *Touch Of Evil* set the bar for the oner with its explosive opening scene. Martin Scorsese (who cameos in *The Studio*) deployed a legendary three-minute shot through the Copacabana nightclub in 1990's *GoodFellas*. And, in 1992, Robert Altman's *The Player* began with an eight-minute tracking shot that self-referentially shows the making of a movie. But it was John Woo's *Hard Boiled*, in the same year, that really cracked the format, combining several shoot-'em-up moments, including a midway elevator ride, in one.

But could an entire *film* ever, truly, be a oner? Hold my monitor, said director Alexander Sokurov in 2002, and out came *Russian Ark*, which deployed 2,000 actors to tell 300 years of Russian history. Since then, we've had 2015's German crime thriller *Victoria* and 2018's brutally unrelenting *Utøya: July 22*, which dramatised Norway's summer-camp massacre.

Of late, technology has made the fake version even easier to achieve, enabling directors to amp up the verisimilitude. *Birdman* relied on an Alexa M camera that could record super-long takes, but it also used digital effects to conceal cuts. *1917* was the first film to use the ultra-light ARRI



Above: *The Studio* episode 'The Oner' (2025), in which Seth Rogen's Matt Remick constantly interferes as the crew attempt the shot. **Top right:** *Birdman* (2014). **Above right:** Orson Welles' *Touch Of Evil* (1958).

Alexa Mini LF digital cinema camera, utilising cutting-edge VFX to blend shots together. And, spoiler alert: while the second episode of *The Studio* is made to look like a oner, it's actually, as Goldberg quips, closer to a "fourer".

But for the most part, it's extended shots, rather than all-in-one compositions, that became more modish. Films by the likes of Alfonso Cuarón (*Gravity*, *Children Of Men*) and Robert Eggers (*The Northman*, *Nosferatu*) have hinged on stretched and unstitched scenes of epic proportions — the director's uncut, if you will. "It's really trying to build tension in a way that you only get in real-time," says Jarin Blaschke, the cinematographer for Eggers' last three films. "We get you to lean into the movie and become a participant."

He and Eggers, he explains, prefer to bring the action to the camera, rather than vice versa. But while their work is the real deal, it's neither here nor there for Blaschke if such sequences are genuine or not. "Oners are heavily edited. It's [all about] the concept and the effect. I personally don't care if it's real or fake unless it's visibly disruptive to see the artifice."

Meanwhile, earlier this year, one series, which very much involved true oners, created a seamless piece of retina-scarring drama. *Adolescence* is a force of television for many reasons. The story, which sees Jamie Miller (Owen Cooper), a 13-year-old British boy accused of murder, coming of age in the criminal justice system, is deeply disturbing. But equally integral to its impact is the way each episode is shot: one take, no cuts, no ifs, no buts.

Philip Barantini is fast becoming the figurehead of the TV oner: having directed Stephen Graham in 2021's one-shot feature film *Boiling Point*, which saw chef Andy Jones spiral into a breakdown in real time, he then headed up 2023's follow-up series. Originally an actor and producer, he first experimented with the form when he began to try his hand at directing through a series of workshops. "It was an amazing process for me but also for the actors to continue for a long period of time and just be in the moment and be real," he tells *Empire*.

For *Adolescence*, Barantini took things up a notch, with multiple locations, and many characters. The key, he says, was seeing the action through the lens of the viewer: "We had to always think about where the camera is, because it's the audience's eyes." Rather than a scene, each narrative element became what Barantini and his cinematographer Matthew Lewis termed a 'moment' that had to be meticulously planned. "We had to dissect the script and be like: 'What are we focusing on here? Are we able to just look at this person and listen to the other person speaking?'"

While it's tempting to move the camera back and forth, it's not too fun for the audience. "It becomes a bit nauseating," Barantini laughs. "You never want them to be able to *feel* the camera. You want them to just have the feeling that we're going on this journey. The challenge is trying to find that balance." He notes that this was particularly intricate in Episodes 1 (a police interrogation) and 3 (a psychological assessment at a juvenile centre), where we are intently listening to characters talk at length. "You've got two people in a room and you can't just be on a wide shot for the whole time, you have to watch their back-and-forth. So it was important to figure out who we need to settle on for a moment and when to move back. And how does that make us feel?" A lot, is the short answer: the single-take element undoubtedly contributes to the arrestingly unflinching emotion of *Adolescence*.

Technology played its part in making this all possible. The main drawback of the oner has always been the fact that any sort of change in narrative time or setting has to happen organically. While traditional cutting has allowed us to go from Todmorden to Timbuktu, or dinosaurs to robots in the blink of an eye, the oner is bound to the laws of physics. If a character needs to get from A to B, we have to see the entire journey — and go with them for ›

Alexander Skarsgård, observed by cast and crew, on Robert Eggers' *The Northman* (2022).

the ride, in real-time, too.

Adolescence gets around this issue at the end of Episode 2 via deployment of a drone, which smoothly tracks from a pupil leaving school to a shot of Stephen Graham at the murder scene, 0.3 miles away. Drones weren't used in a major film until 2012's *Skyfall* and it's taken a while for TV to get up to speed. Now, a camera can take a bird's-wing-trip from one scene to another, allowing the oner to incorporate a drastic change in setting.

And where *Boiling Point* made use of a Sony Venice on an Easyrig, *Adolescence* whipped out a Ronin 4D camera with a built-in gimbal (a more recent innovation which uses sensors and motors to stabilise movement). "At the press of a button we were able to go into handheld mode," Barantini explains, noting that it wouldn't have been possible to do even a year earlier. But while shiny new toys are likely to make the true oner more viable than ever for cinematographers, it's not made it any easier a feat for those in *front* of the camera.

Filming a oner can be painstaking. It's basically like playing a video game without any lives, saves or checkpoints — you can get millimetres of film or milliseconds of footage away from the final 'moment' and then have to go all the way back to square one. A one-shot scene doesn't mean a one-take scene; Episode 4 of *Adolescence*, for example, took 16 takes to get right.

Alexander Skarsgård, who played Viking warrior Amleth in *The Northman*, knows this all too well. "Battle scenes were a nightmare," he previously told *Empire*. "We would shoot these incredibly choreographed, brutal, very violent scenes with 40 stuntmen, 50 actors, 300 extras, horses running around... and if one little detail in the deep background wasn't perfect then we'd have to shoot the whole sequence again."

This taps into part of the oner's appeal: the challenge. It's basically a bit of a flex to achieve it. And that obviously applies for the actors, too, who have to nail every single line. "[Some] actors absolutely thrive on it," Barantini says. Stephen Graham is, of course, a shining example of this. "He is so empathetic. He feels things and he listens and he's in the moment, constantly present and can feel that energy."

Mistakes can be saved by embracing them. Improv is the get-out-of-jail-free card of the oner; adapt rapidly and you can create a sensational spontaneous detail. But that only adds to the pressure. "We told them something that would make a lot of actors shit their pants," says Goldberg of *The Studio*. "We said, 'You can improv whatever you want, just know that if you fuck it up, you've ruined everything. So do it in your brain first.'" He tells a tale about forgetting to brief actor Dave Franco, who tried a tiny improv that didn't work. "We were like, 'Okay, we've got to go again.' He was like, 'You fucking son of a bitch.'" Other times, it pays off; in *1917*, an accidental collision between George MacKay and two extras during a battlefield scene made it into the finished film, creating a moment of genuine magic.

The pressure can take its toll. "It's a huge challenge for any actor to undertake. Some actors absolutely do shit themselves because they're so used to takes and cuts," Barantini says. And while Skarsgård is far beyond the calibre of such incontinence, making *The Northman* was still a marathon effort: "It was physically and mentally incredibly challenging on the day, because just doing one of those sequences once is draining," he told us. "So doing it 30 times, you're incredibly exhausted." But is the pain worth the gain? For Skarsgård, yes. "As exhausting as it was to shoot it, the feeling when you finally get it on take 35... you're ecstatic."

Ultimately, for directors, it creates a hyperfocus. "When we were filming, there's one monitor with 150 people staring at it. And the focus and team synergy it creates is something that we didn't really know would happen," Goldberg says, noting that all types of crew members contributed to the collaboration. "You get hooked on the process," Blaschke says.

Above: Philip Barantini's lauded *Adolescence* (2025). The oner technique complemented the challenging subject matter. **Above right, top to bottom:** *Children Of Men* (2006); The Copacabana nightclub walk in *GoodFellas* (1990).

"There's a clarity in what you're doing and I find myself paring things down to the minimum and eliminating as much as possible, which I love to do."

So the oner is a winner, right? Well, there is one potentially fatal flaw that threatens its lore — the spectre of gimmickry. "I feel like sometimes [oners] draw attention to themselves in a bad way," Eggers recently told *Empire*, emphasising that making it feel natural is integral. "Sometimes they don't, but [in *Nosferatu*] I think it feels more invisible and you're just in the story, with these long takes."

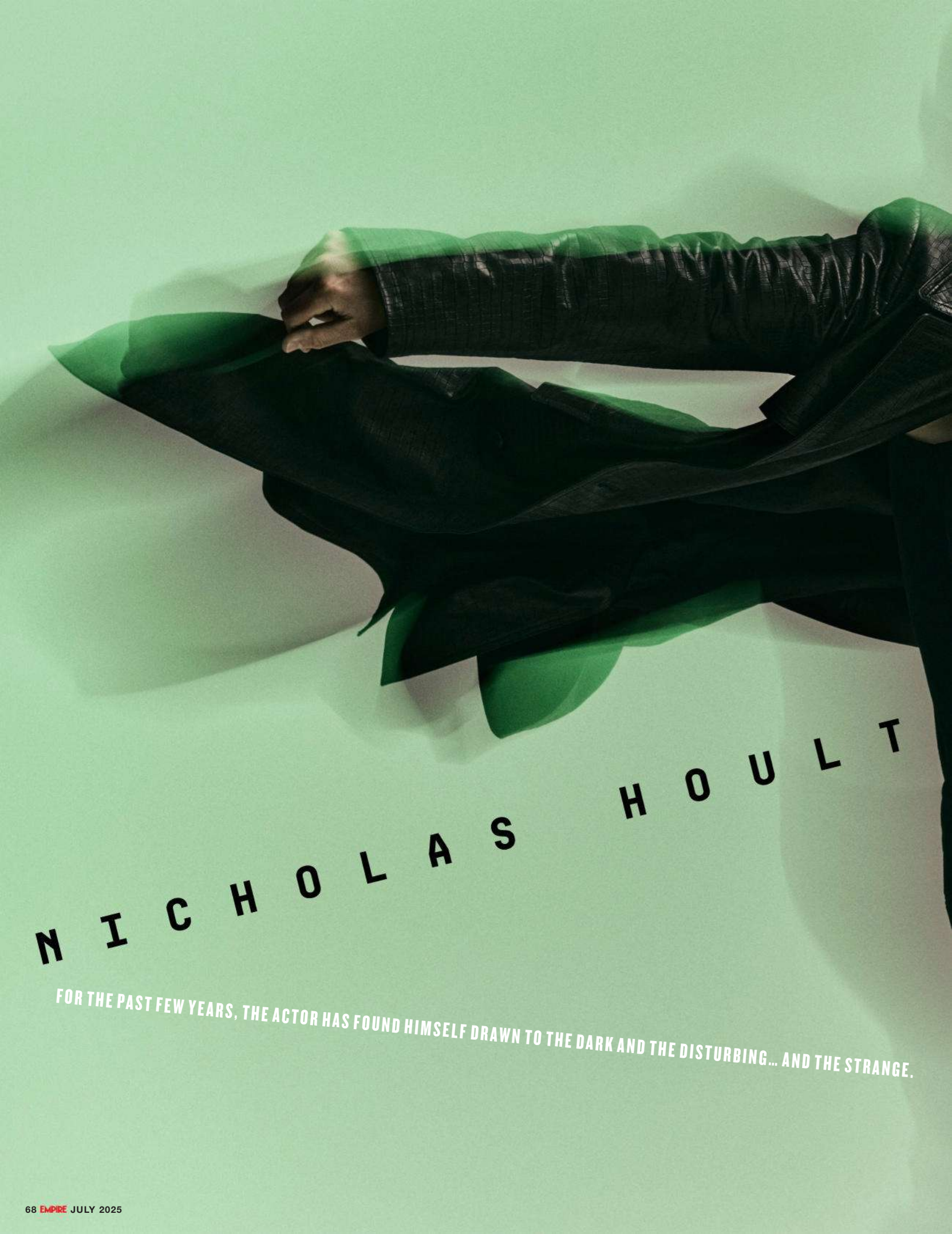
Goldberg has some reservations, too. "I mean, it is fundamentally pretentious," he says. "There's no two ways about it. You don't have to do it. You choose to do it." Or perhaps, as Blaschke reflects, it's all an act of one-upmanship. "Is it, you know, just, 'My dick's bigger than yours'?"

Dick-swinging aside, when deployed discerningly, the oner can be magic, worth all the off-camera drama. As Remick enthuses in *The Studio*, it's a "great storytelling tool" and you get to see characters emotionally develop in real time, offering nuances not usually afforded by cuts, plus a sense of total immersion. As Godard once opined: "Film is truth 24 times a second, and every cut is a lie." Maybe, then, the oner is the most real film can get. In the past few years, we have been increasingly able to manipulate our experience through AI filters, message unsends, deepfakes and all the other dystopian tools at our disposal. And while we can't yet totally edit our reality in real-time, social media has made short-form content choppier than ever; some Instagram Reels genuinely contain more cuts than the entirety of, say, *1917*.

Arguably, this new trend of single-take cinema has come at a time when we need it the most. Disillusioned by our world of cut-up content — and our ability to play director and switch between different vignettes with a quick swipe — we're attracted to the more rewarding, enriching quality of a drawn-out scene, exercising our atrophied attention spans.

Blaschke, for one, says that he and Eggers are moving away from the oner for their upcoming lupine horror *Werwulf*: "We're going to do our next movie in a different way. We've had some success with this technique, so you've got to push your own frontier." But Goldberg, like *The Studio*'s hapless Matt Remick, thinks audiences will continue to crave the oner. "Because of CGI and movie trickery advancements, people want the real thing," he says. "They want to see real life, really shown to them."

Real life. In real time. And whether it's the real deal or not, the oner is here to stay.



NICHOLAS HOULT

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, THE ACTOR HAS FOUND HIMSELF DRAWN TO THE DARK AND THE DISTURBING… AND THE STRANGE.

Nicholas Hoult, photographed exclusively for *Empire* on 1 May 2025 at Hubble Studio, Los Angeles.

I S M I S B E H A V I N G

WORDS
HAYLEY CAMPBELL

MONICA MAY

NOW, AS HE PLAYS POWER-HUNGRY MANIAC LEX LUTHOR IN SUPERMAN, HE TELLS US WHY NORMALITY IS HIS KRYPTONITE

LATELY, THINGS HAVE BEEN INCREASINGLY weird for Nicholas Hoult. Then again, his characters have always been kind of weird. When we first met him in *About A Boy* 23 years ago, he played a socially awkward kid determined to secure himself a stepdad in the event his mother (Toni Collette) killed herself. Then in *Skins*, the TV show that made him far more famous than he was comfortable with, he played the manipulative, morally dubious Tony Stonem. In the closest thing he's made to a romantic comedy, 2013's *Warm Bodies*, he's a zombie with a literally dead heart. Even Hoult thinks he's at his best when he's having the most fun, doing weird shit like getting pissed off with a duck and threatening to eat its liver with a cornichon in Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Favourite*, or in George Miller's *Mad Mad: Fury Road*, where he played Nux, a sickly War Boy desperate to explode himself into Valhalla.

Last year saw the release of three Hoult movies, which were all shot one after the other, with only a couple of days' break in-between. He went from having his life destroyed by Count Orlok in Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu*, to playing real-life neo-Nazi Bob Mathews in Justin Kurzel's *The Order*, to portraying a possibly guilty man in Clint Eastwood's *Juror #2*, with a screentest pitstop between the last two for James Gunn's *Superman*. Which may be one of the biggest blockbusters of the year, but with Hoult playing Lex Luthor, Superman's nemesis this time around is bound to be a more off-kilter megalomaniac.

For a nice young man who says a cheery hello to *Empire*'s cat when said feline jumps up and fills the Zoom screen with his furry body, it's notable that Hoult rarely seems to play the nice young man. He was in Dublin for a friend's stag do when we called him, way too early in the morning, to ask about his whole deal.

Your work is becoming increasingly... strange. That's a compliment, by the way.
(*Laughs*) Oh good!

Is that deliberate? Is the morally complicated-grey-area stuff what you're personally interested in?
Yeah, definitely. That's what I find interesting to explore just in terms of how humans function: the weird things. The ways we behave, how people condone their behaviour, or explain it, or don't explain it to themselves. But from an outsider's point of view, going in there and being like, "How can I try and figure out what's going on there?" It's like being a little detective. It's just exploring different realms of what it is to be

Previous page: Amiri

human. Also, I think that's more frequently than not the sort of film I like. I can't exactly describe what itch it scratches for me. [Films where] there's more going on under the surface than I can fully understand, or I've learned something, or I've got a different perspective. That's probably it.

Do you ever audition for, like, the fluffy romantic lead? And then someone says, "No, Nicholas, you're the weird guy"?
People *tell* me I'm the weird guy, but it's not always work-related. (*Laughs*) I don't know. I think there's an element of choosing it. And then there's also an element of people being like, "I don't really know where to put him." Because I don't think I'm necessarily quite the conventional *anything*. That's probably a good thing. In terms of the actors that I adore watching, they don't do things predictably.

What kind of actors are you talking about?
The first person I think of is Willem Dafoe. I love Willem. I think he's so brilliant, and I love watching him.

Right, top to bottom: As baldy War Boy Nux, in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015); Dressed up to the nines as Harley in *The Favourite* (2018); Megalomaniac Lex Luthor in James Gunn's upcoming *Superman*.

This page: Saint Laurent

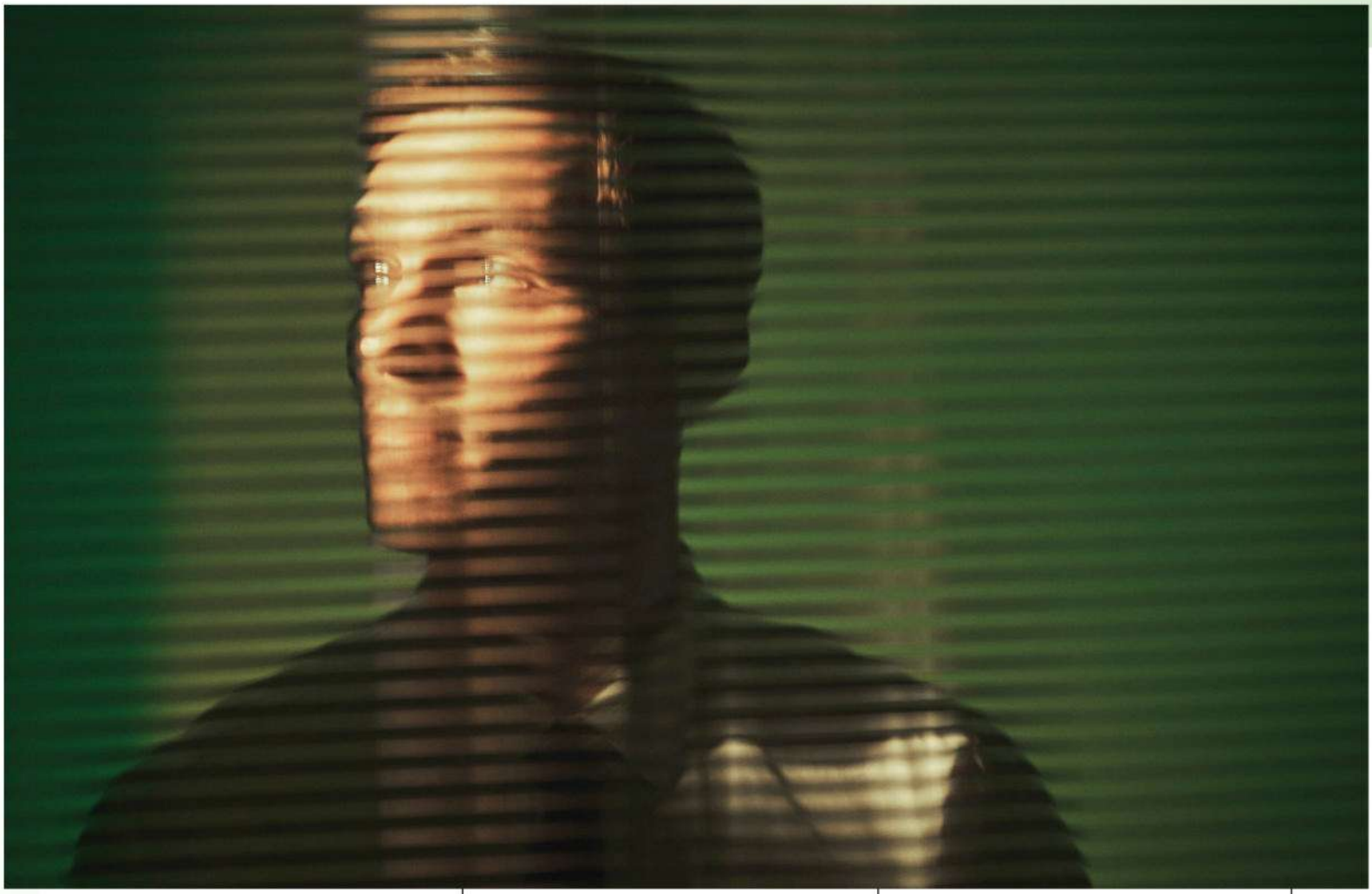
Dafoe is another actor who's not going to be the normal guy in any movie — he's going to be the other guy.
Yeah. That's not to say that I *don't* want to do some romcoms and those sorts of things. But when I look at the page and people describe a character as "charming", I'm like, "Well, how do you... I don't... My brain doesn't understand that." (*Laughs*) That's probably where the weirdness comes from. These other characters, there's stuff where it's... *something*. There's more for my brain to be busy doing than just trying to be charming.

You auditioned for the role of Superman, but you were cast as Lex Luthor instead. How does that feel, to try for the (relatively) more normal guy, and then get the weird-guy role again?
I remember reading the script for the first time and there was a tiny little piece of my instinct that was like, "You might be a good Lex," or, "You might have fun playing this character." Probably going back to what we were speaking about — those moral grey areas, and people being interesting to me. But I brushed it aside. I wasn't listening to my instincts, which I guess is not a good thing. So I went and did the test and enjoyed that, but then when James [Gunn] called me [and told me he wanted me for Lex Luthor], I didn't say anything at first — I just *cackled*! Because there was an instant flash in my brain where I went, "Oh, you *knew* this would be best." So there was a moment of excitement, joy, thrill, and then also I'd say *relief* or something, where I was like, "Oh, this has ended up how it should have done if I had kind of listened to my gut early on."

What else did you like about Lex?
There was something about Lex where I looked at it and [thought that]... Mishmashing all these things that I've been doing recently together, or I feel like I've learned as an actor, and grown into in these last few years — all of these things combined and put into this could be a good flavour.

Did you look to Gene Hackman's take on him, and other screen iterations?
Yeah, Gene's one of my all-time faves, just as an actor in general. I went back and watched Gene. And Michael Rosenbaum, who was the first Lex I saw, growing up watching *Smallville* [on TV]. It's interesting when you play a character that's been played before — you're working from a different script, but it's fun to draw inspiration from all of those places.

You're bald in Superman, but you've shaved your hair in the past. When you did it the first time for *Fury Road*, did you ever worry you'd have a weird-shaped head?
For *Fury Road* I shaved it into a mohawk first and then I took it completely off. Having a weird-shaped head wasn't something that I was particularly worried about, and people speak ›



about that a lot! When you shave your head, everyone starts bringing up weird-shaped heads. I never really considered that. I guess it was just like, well, I was gonna do it. Let's find out what we're dealing with.

How is everyone worried about having a weird-shaped head except for you?
There's nothing you can do about the shape of it!

Do you prefer to play characters that look different from yourself, physically?
Yeah, for me it's like... Do you listen to these interviews back? And you have to hear your voice?

Yeah. It's terrible.
Right, so everyone hates the sound of their own voice. I can't stand the sound of my own voice so the further I can sound *not* like myself or not look like myself, then it's easier for me to watch.

What's the furthest away from yourself you've ever got?
Appearance-wise? Back to the *X-Men* movies, playing The Beast. Emotionally? That's a different question. That would be [neo-Nazi Bob Mathews in] *The Order*. That's... probably the right one to say. (*Mock-panicked look at the screen*)

Let's talk about *Nosferatu*. Robert Eggers said in an interview with *Empire* that he told you there could be a little bit of Hugh Grant in your character, Hutter, who was "trying so hard not to fuck up, and all he's doing is fucking up". Since you met him so young, how much do you think Grant influenced you? Are you conscious of any Hugh Grantiness in your performances?
I've been on a little bit of an early-Hugh-Grant kick at the moment. I was watching *Maurice* and *The Remains Of The Day* — the Merchant Ivory stuff. Because I only knew all his later stuff, from the period where I was working with him [in *About A Boy*] onwards. It was exciting to see him in those roles, because it was kind of a different version of Hugh. I see what [Eggers] is saying in terms of [Hutter] always trying to do the right thing, and he's a little bit behind, in a slightly naive way. But it would be more, now having seen it, the earlier Hugh. Occasionally, when we were doing *The Great*, people would say, "You seem to be doing a few Hugh-isms." I certainly wasn't *consciously* trying to do that, but there's a part of me that goes, "Oh, you did work with him at a very formative time in your life." And also obviously [he was] very influential in terms of, like, suddenly you're put into this weird world of promoting a film, and you're with this person who you see is very funny and eloquent and charming and has that personality, and you go, "Okay, so did I accidentally, perhaps, get influenced by them a little bit by that, in a good, positive way?" Maybe!

Top: As mutant Beast in 2011's *X-Men: First Class*. **Above:** Where it all started: *About A Boy* (2002), as troubled 12-year-old Marcus alongside Hugh Grant.

Apart from Hutter fucking up in *Nosferatu*, he spends a lot of time being frightened. By his wife, by the villagers, by Orlok. Was there ever a time on set where you were actually freaked out?
Yeah! When I'm getting chased by the wolves, and I climb out the window. They were Czech Shepherds, so they weren't wolves but *part*-wolf. When we met them with the animal handlers, they were like, "Oh, they're just like dogs." But there were also all these rules. "They're just like dogs, *but don't do this, and don't do that, and if you're gonna give them a treat, do it straight away*." When we got to set, there was a moment before that scene where I'm running on the ›

This page: Saint Laurent
Right: Amiri

“I’M GONNA KEEP GETTING DARKER AND STRANGER UNTIL PEOPLE ARE LIKE, ‘NO!! TOO FAR!’”

Styling: Jason Bolden.
Grooming: Kara Yoshimoto Bua using Chanel.

“I LIKE BEING A LITTLE DETECTIVE. EXPLORING DIFFERENT REALMS OF WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN.”

spot, trying to get my heart-rate up. The wolves — it sent them *crazy*. They'd been told to chase me and then they saw me getting myself fired up, and they were barking, being held back on these leashes. I was like (*looks genuinely afraid*), "Whoa! Whoooooaaa." And there was one time doing that shot where I was running — they'd be like, "Okay, three-two-one, action," and I would go on three, and [the wolves] would be released on one — and there was one time where I slipped, trying to get out of the window. I was like, "Well, I know these wolves have been released, and I know they're chasing me, but I never asked, like... 'What are they trained to do if they *do* get to me? Like, what's the end goal here, what if I don't make it out the window??'" I remember after that take, [Eggers] being like, "You pulled a weird face, we can't use that." That was real! That was a moment of real panic! I was going like (*pulls comical, deeply un-Eggers film face*) because I was just thinking, "Oh no."

Why were you gifted Orlok's prosthetic penis at the end of filming? Did you have an alarming number of questions about it on the day or something?
No, I received the penis because there's a scene where it suddenly cuts to a wide angle, and you see Orlok/Bill [Skarsgård] on top of me, drinking my blood. And whilst we were doing that scene, the way that Bill was moving, I could *feel* the prosthetic on my leg. And whilst we were rehearsing I couldn't stop giggling. So that was why I had... *interactions* with the prosthetic. That was probably the funniest wrap gift I've ever been given. The best thing was when it got shipped back to my house, the frame broke, so I had to take it into a frame shop. And as I unwrapped it the guy looked at it like, "... What is going on here?" To be fair, he took it in his stride considering that I was like, "Hey, we need to fix the frame of this penis that I've got mounted." And when I went back in to pick it up all he said was, "Is this some kind of... collector's piece?"

You've been in two vampire movies, with *Renfield*—
Not intentionally! It wasn't like I said, "This is my vampire era."

Is it something about being pale and English that draws them to you, if you're not seeking them out?
I think when they need pale English, they're like, "Well, who's *that* guy?" And there I am, hiding from the sun in the shadows. (*Laughs*) After *Nosferatu*, we went to start shooting *The Order* and my character was meant to be outdoorsy and living in nature. When I looked him up, he was a very tanned person. So I would go and get fake tans. One thing I didn't realise was, as part of Jude Law's prep, Justin [Kurzel] had him follow me. I didn't know until we were doing the press tour that Jude had been following me around for a day — he'd been tailing me like an FBI agent or a detective. When I found out he'd done it, I was like, "Wow, I never knew you did that. (*Warily*)... What was I doing?" [He said], "It was pretty boring, to be honest. You went to the shops." Luckily, it wasn't a day where I was going to get a fake tan. I was like, "Oh no! I hope he hasn't seen me sneaking into the [fake tan] store with my slides on, coming out, drying off."

Top to bottom: Stricken in *Nosferatu* (2024); As white supremacist Bob Mathews in *The Order* (2024); Troubled times with Elle Fanning in TV series *The Great* (2020-'23); On set of 2024's *Juror #2* with director Clint Eastwood.

What tasks did you do as prep for *The Order*? Did you have to read a lot of depressing racist stuff to get into that mindset?
Yeah. The book that the film was based on (The Silent Brotherhood *by Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt*) was a great source of information for that, and about Bob, and then reading lots around those ideologies and beliefs. One of the things was sending voice-notes as the character to [Kurzel] whilst I was sitting in the trailer [while] shooting *Nosferatu*. I'd go have lunch, and then I'd get a message from Justin, being like, "Hey, leave me a voice-note as Bob telling me all the guns he owns."

Bob Mathews was the leader of this white supremacist militant group. It's a risky role to play. Was it hard not to judge him when you were doing it?
Yeah, of course you judge, but then you don't at the same time. Does that make sense? Obviously you read horrible things and you're like, "Wow, this is horrendous." But then when you're playing the character, you can't have your judgements influence how you're portraying him. You've gotta strip that layer back, and just do the work without the judgement on top of it.

Shifting gears slightly, but probably no less jarringly than going from *The Order* back to Transylvania, let's talk about *The Great*. The thing that sticks out most in that show is, obviously, the dialogue. What's the most outrageous line you've had to say?
Oh my God. There are so many. I would giggle every day reading those scripts. I remember one of the days I *really* struggled not to corpse [was when] Peter (*played by Hoult*) decided that [his son] was sick because of the nanny's milk. So he decided to test the milk. So I was having to pretend to test breast milk, and then Catherine (*Elle Fanning*) walks in and sees Peter sucking on nipples. And honestly, just having to stop doing what I was doing, because, first of all, you're trying to look like you're sucking nipples, while not *actually* sucking nipples—

Wait, what are you actually sucking on? A fake nipple?
No, real nipples, real boobs...

So, just not actually drinking breast milk.
Every time I would make eye contact [with Fanning], we just both burst out laughing. I said, *"What is this job?!"*

I've heard Clint Eastwood has a nickname for you based on that role...
He would call me Captain Lingus! Because Peter was meant to be very good at cunnilingus — the "tongue trick". So I'd walk on set [of *Juror #2*] and Clint would salute me like (*Hoult winks and salutes*), "Cap'n Lingus." Because I was confused — I was like, "How did I end up in a movie by Clint Eastwood??" His way of casting is watching people in things and I guess he'd seen me in that and liked it.

That's probably your name in Clint Eastwood's phone.
(*Laughs*) Yep, that's what pops up when I call him.

What do you want to do next? Do you want to keep getting darker and stranger?
I'm gonna keep getting darker and stranger until people are like, "No!! Too far!" (*Laughs*) I don't have a master plan. [But] it seems like a lot of the performances that I grew up loving, or specifically when actors would go on runs of things, [it] seemed to be in their thirties and forties. So I've always been excited about this period of my career. So, keep trying to do unexpected things. And take some risks.

SUPERMAN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 JULY

Left: Amiri
Additional imagery: Imago, Prime Video, Warner Bros.

High On The Hog

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

IN 1995, A TINY TALKING PIG WON THE PLANET'S HEARTS, PUSHED THE VFX ENVELOPE — AND PUT A SERIOUS DENT IN THE PORK INDUSTRY. AS **BABE** TURNS 30, **GEORGE MILLER** REVISITS THE GROUNDBREAKING FAMILY CLASSIC (AND ITS UTTERLY BONKERS SEQUEL)

George Miller thought he was done with pigs.

It was the (curly) tail end of 1984, and the Australian director had spent the past few months surrounded by oinking farm animals on set of his third *Mad Max* movie, *Beyond Thunderdome*. "I'd eat lunch with pigs all around me," Miller chuckles. "I came to learn how sensitive they are. We bred them for their meat, but we didn't breed out their intelligence."

Porkers had played an integral part in *Beyond Thunderdome*, which saw Max infiltrate an underground refinery that transforms pig poo into methane. But with production wrapped, Miller assumed his days of sharing a call sheet with porcine performers were over. One long-haul flight proved him wrong. "I was somewhere over India, looking down at the campfires on the horizon," he recalls. "I was flying to London [from Australia] to record the score [for *Beyond Thunderdome*], and I couldn't sleep so I was listening to the radio. There was this critic reviewing children's books. She got to this book called *The Sheep-Pig*, by Dick King-Smith, and the way she was laughing about this story just made me want to find out more." Jet lag be damned, Miller found a bookshop the moment he landed in London. "I read it in one night," he remembers. "My reaction was the same as the critics'. I was delighted."

More than a decade later, that bleary-eyed binge-read resulted in *Babe*. The tale of an indefatigably cheery, talking piglet who moonlights as a sheepdog, the movie's unique blend of storybook charm and weightier themes about farmyard brutality had a seismic effect. When *Babe* was released in 1995 — earning $254 million against its $30 million budget — it inspired swathes of young people across the globe to become vegetarian ("Someone in [UK] Parliament complained about the effect it was having on the pork industry," Miller laughs). It also garnered glittering reviews from critics (butchers were presumably less keen), embedded the phrase, "That'll do, Pig," in the public consciousness, and bagged the Oscar for Visual Effects, in addition to being nominated for Best Picture, Director and Screenplay — a rare coup for a children's film.

Any hopes of a *Babe* mega-franchise were packed off to the abattoir by Miller's insanely bleak 1998 sequel *Babe: Pig In The City* (more on which later). Thirty years on, though, the little pig with the big heart remains as beloved as ever — the original revered as a masterclass in both heartstring-tugging storytelling and technological wizardry. Miller knew right from the start he had something special: "As I turned the last page of the book, my first thought was: 'This *has* to be a movie,'" he grins.

Of course, his *second* thought — this being the pre-digital mid-'80s — was: How the hell do you make a pig talk?

Facing page: Babe on sheep-pig duty. **Left, top to bottom:** James Cromwell as Farmer Hoggett; Fly has a word with her porcine pal; Filming at the location for Hoggett's Farm in Australia; "Baa-ram-ewe, baa-ram-ewe! Sheep be true!"; Cromwell with director Chris Noonan on set.

THERE WAS AN OBVIOUS ANSWER TO THIS question, but it didn't interest George Miller.

"I didn't want to do animation," he tells us over Zoom from his Sydney home. "*The Sheep-Pig* is not a kinetic story. Not much happens. It's pastoral, gentle. It would have felt dull with conventional animation. I wanted to do it with real animals, and somehow make them speak."

In the analogue era, this represented a major technological conundrum. So, Miller sought out one of cinema's great technological conundrum-solvers. "Someone at Warner Bros. put me in touch with Stanley Kubrick," he says. "Stanley was an intensely curious person, always pushing technology. I found something kindred there because the tools of filmmaking fascinate me, too." Kubrick had pioneered the groundbreaking effects on *2001: A Space Odyssey* and co-opted NASA satellite lenses for *Barry Lyndon*. If anyone could make a pig talk, Miller reasoned, it was Stanley Kubrick.

"Stanley never left his compound [Childwickbury Manor in Hertfordshire], so I never met him," Miller laughs. "But we talked every night on the phone for weeks. He became very intrigued about us trying to make a pig speak." The pair went deep on the possibility of employing early computer-editing systems — which Kubrick was using on *Full Metal Jacket*. But the chance to properly tinker together went begging. "I was working with this company called Quantel, based 30 miles from Stanley's house," Miller recalls. "They did TV graphics, but they were also a secret lab, because they did military imaging and infrared photography. I was desperate to get Stanley in there, but on the day he was meant to come, his daughter had a baby so he went to London instead." That, sadly, was that. "I never heard from him again. I'm not sure if he ever even saw *Babe*."

Eventually, a discussion with *E.T.* cinematographer Allen Daviau persuaded Miller to put the brakes on the project. "Allen said, 'George, you can't do this analogue. Just wait. Wait for digital.'" So, Miller waited. As the '80s rolled into the '90s, he enlisted Australian director Chris Noonan to co-write the script — now titled *Babe*, after *The Sheep-Pig*'s corkscrew-tailed hero. And by 1993, when Steven Spielberg unleashed ILM's game-changing, ultra-realistic CG dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*, Miller knew the technology had finally caught up. He brought the script to Universal — the studio behind Spielberg's blockbuster — and they snapped it up. "If it wasn't for what Steven did with *Jurassic Park*, Universal wouldn't have been so open to taking on *Babe*," he says.

With that, the brakes were off. And as the T-Rexes and Velociraptors stormed the box office, Miller set about bringing a smaller, cuter and far more verbose creature to life.

BEFORE WORK COULD OFFICIALLY recommence on the how-the-hell-do-you-make-a-pig-talk? problem, a regime change was in order.

By 1993, Miller was contractually unable to direct *Babe*, having signed on to helm the sci-fi drama *Contact*, starring Jodie Foster. "I was eventually fired from that. Almost willingly," Miller deadpans. "But that's another story." His *Contact* commitment, though, meant that the directorial reins on *Babe* were handed to Noonan — a TV stalwart who had yet to direct a theatrical feature — with Miller taking a producer role. "The studio was okay with it," Miller explains of the switch. "But they made me promise that if things went wrong, I'd take over."

We'll come to whether things went wrong, and to what extent Miller took over, in a moment. First, though — the pig. Or, more accurately — *pigs*, plural. Forty-six different Large White Yorkshire piglets were enlisted to play the film's hero — all female (despite the fact Babe is male) because, as Miller notes, "there were lots of low-angle shots. No-one wants to see pig testicles". The porcine turnover was high due to the animal trainers' technique: a pig's reward for following orders was a tasty treat (commercial-brand dog food), and after a few days of this calorie-loading process, the creatures no longer resembled the spritely piglets they once had. "We got about two weeks per pig," Miller laughs. "They grew very quickly."

In total, there were 500 animals on the *Babe* set during the five-month shoot in New South Wales — pigs, dogs, cats, sheep, horses, ducks, mice. The plan was to use as much footage of these real creatures as possible, digitally manipulating their mouths to make them jabber away at each other. The result was a huge step forward in terms of using VFX for storytelling — as the main characters, Babe and his four-legged pals needed to display personality ›

and emotion in a way Spielberg's dinosaurs didn't. But it was a slow process. "The first [digital] animations we did were so *timid*," Miller laments. "The animals all had these kind of Betty Boop mouths." He adopts that character's coquettish pout: "Imagine that, but on a cow." They eventually nailed it, learning that when it came to digital trickery, less was more. "We never had to [manipulate] the animals' eyes," Miller notes. "Our trainers got amazingly natural performances from them."

Whenever natural performance simply wasn't possible, animatronic pigs and sheepdogs were used — creations so lifelike the crew took to betting on which animals were real and which mechanical during each evening's viewing of the dailies. "We'd mix and match," says Miller. "Sometimes we'd have an animatronic pig talking to a live sheep, other times a real cow with an animatronic dog. Whatever worked."

If the animals all rubbed along nicely, though, the same could not always be said for the humans. James Cromwell, who played Babe's taciturn owner Farmer Hoggett, remembers plenty of on-set tension between Miller and Noonan. "George is tough, he doesn't hold back," Cromwell tells *Empire*. "I enjoyed placing myself between him and Chris. One day, [Miller] pulled Chris off set, marched him to this field and started haranguing him. I thought, 'Fuck that.' So, I went and inserted myself into the conversation until George walked off."

Noonan has spoken about the difficulties of the shoot, claiming, "It was like your guru [Miller] has told you that you are no good... That is really disconcerting." The problem, Miller concedes now, was a difference of vision. "I got very hands-on because I had to," he tells us. "Chris is a nice guy, and he has a good eye, but he wanted something naturalistic — like *Kes*. This *wasn't* a naturalistic film — it's a storybook world. I'd made this promise to the studio, so I had to follow my instincts."

For Cromwell, these power struggles didn't detract from what was a "magical experience, from the moment I got off the plane". The actor had been ready to turn the part down due to it being "very little money", until a friend persuaded him otherwise. "He said, 'It's a free trip to Australia and you've only got 16 lines [two of which were the now-infamous, 'That'll do, Pig,' which bookend the movie]." Plus, the friend added: "If the film flops, it's the pig's fault, not yours."

The film did not flop. Released in August 1995, *Babe* earned back nearly ten times its budget and notched seven Oscar nominations, including a Best Supporting Actor nod for Cromwell. ("The studio wanted to put me up as the lead," he laughs. "I said, 'I may be taller, but the pig's the lead.") For Miller, the gushing reaction simply "confirmed everything I'd felt when I read [King-Smith's] book. It appeals to the adult in the child, and the child in the adult. I think the movie does, too." Universal agreed,

Right: George Miller with his swine star. **Below:** Babe gets a new paint job. **Facing page, top to bottom:** The goose is loose: Ferdinand and Babe keep time in the first film; Babe does his sheep-pig thing; Chimps join the party in the wild sequel; Send in the clown: the legendary Mickey Rooney with Bornean orangutan Thelonius in *Pig In The City*; Mrs Hoggett (Magda Szubanski) flying high.

instructing Miller to get cracking on the next lucrative instalment of this burgeoning family-friendly franchise.

Little did they know that Miller was plotting one of the most batshit sequels in Hollywood history.

THE BULL TERRIER LYNCHED BY ITS OWN leash. The farmer's wife strip-searched on suspicion of drug-trafficking. Mickey Rooney's nightmarish turn as a drunken clown who seems to have wandered in from an episode of *The League Of Gentlemen*.

It's hard to pinpoint the most gobsmackingly horrifying moment from *Babe: Pig In The City*. But the fact that Miller's bizarro 1998 follow-up is Tom Waits' favourite film should prove that this sequel is not exactly laser-targeted at its intended audience of wide-eyed ten-year-olds. There are dark moments in the first *Babe*, of course — the spectre of death at the farmyard, the disturbingly Nietzschean pronouncements of the sheepdogs, who claim sheep are "inferior" and must "bend to [our] will" — but the overriding tone of bucolic whimsy always wins out. In the sequel, there's no contest. Darkness triumphs, hands down.

"Look, if you're just repeating what you've done before, it's not interesting," Miller reasons, when we ask how on earth he got away with creating such a tonally dissonant follow-up. "Each one has to be different."

Clearly giddy from the success of the first film, Universal gave Miller free rein, tripling his budget and allowing him to write a new script, not based on any of King-Smith's subsequent *Sheep-Pig* novels. "I grew up in rural communities, so I was always fascinated by cities," Miller says. "That inspired *Babe 2*. That and the fact I always wanted a pet chimpanzee."

Pig In The City sees Babe lost in a Fritz Lang-esque dystopian metropolis, populated by bloodthirsty stray dogs and suit-wearing circus apes. "The chimps were great," Miller recalls. "Human actors need six or seven takes to get it right. Chimps get what you want in one or two." The finished film is genuinely brilliant — a surrealist fever dream replete with visceral, *Mad Max*-ian action sequences. But back at Universal — where another cosy kids' movie was expected — they were horrified.

"George showed [an early cut] to some executives and their children," says Cromwell, whose character sets the child-friendly tone by shattering every bone in his body three minutes in. "The kids all ran out of the theatre, screaming."

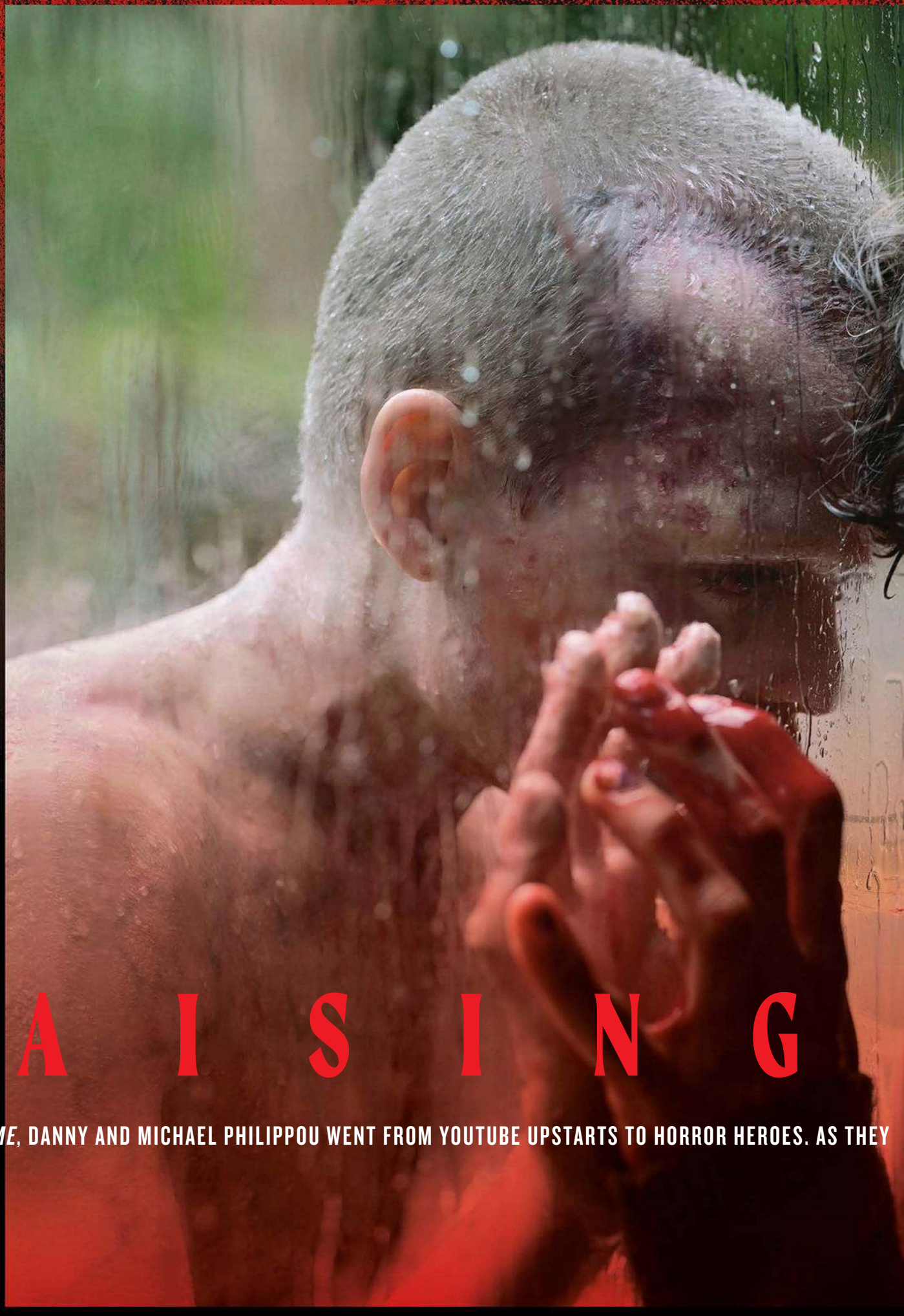
"Yeah, I got into trouble during post-production," Miller sighs. "The, 'It's too dark,' comments came after the test screening. The studio panicked and wanted me to cut bits out." These bits included a brutally extended version of the aforementioned dog-lynching scene, as well as the murder of a (human) neighbour and a lab full of chain-smoking rabbits. The last-minute edits were too little, too late, though. The movie bombed on release, earning $69 million against its $90 million budget.

"You're always disappointed when a story doesn't resonate," Miller says, stoically. "Though it's wonderful to hear Tom Waits likes it." Cromwell claims Miller had a third film primed and ready to go, but "the second one tanked so bad, [the studio] pulled it". However, with the first film still winning over new generations — and the second increasingly attaining 'cult classic' status — is there a chance we might yet see another outing for the much-loved chattering porker? "If George was silly enough to offer it to me, I'd say yes!" Cromwell says. Miller shrugs: "We've mapped out some stories, so if the planets align... who knows? But I've got a few other things to get done before my use-by date."

Whether or not Babe returns, the original's legacy is secure — not just as a timeless family classic and VFX masterclass, but also a powerful ethical polemic. A 2009 scientific paper titled 'The "Babe" Vegetarians' explored the film's role in turning its young audience away from meat-eating. Cromwell, too, upgraded from casual vegetarian to vegan animal-rights activist after starring in the film, and Miller "still can't eat pork after *Babe*". He insisted all 46 piglets from the first film went to farms and schools, not abattoirs. "I learned a lot on *Babe*," he says. "For instance, I was brought up with negative punishment. If I made a mistake during a piano lesson, I got cracked on the knuckles. But the animal trainers on *Babe* showed me the power of positive reinforcement. It really helped me bring up my kids."

A movie that broke new cinematic ground, instilled empathy in an entire generation *and* made its creator a better father? That'll do, Pig. That'll do.

Alamy, Allstar, Getty Images, Imago, Mary Evans, MPTV, Photofest, Shutterstock



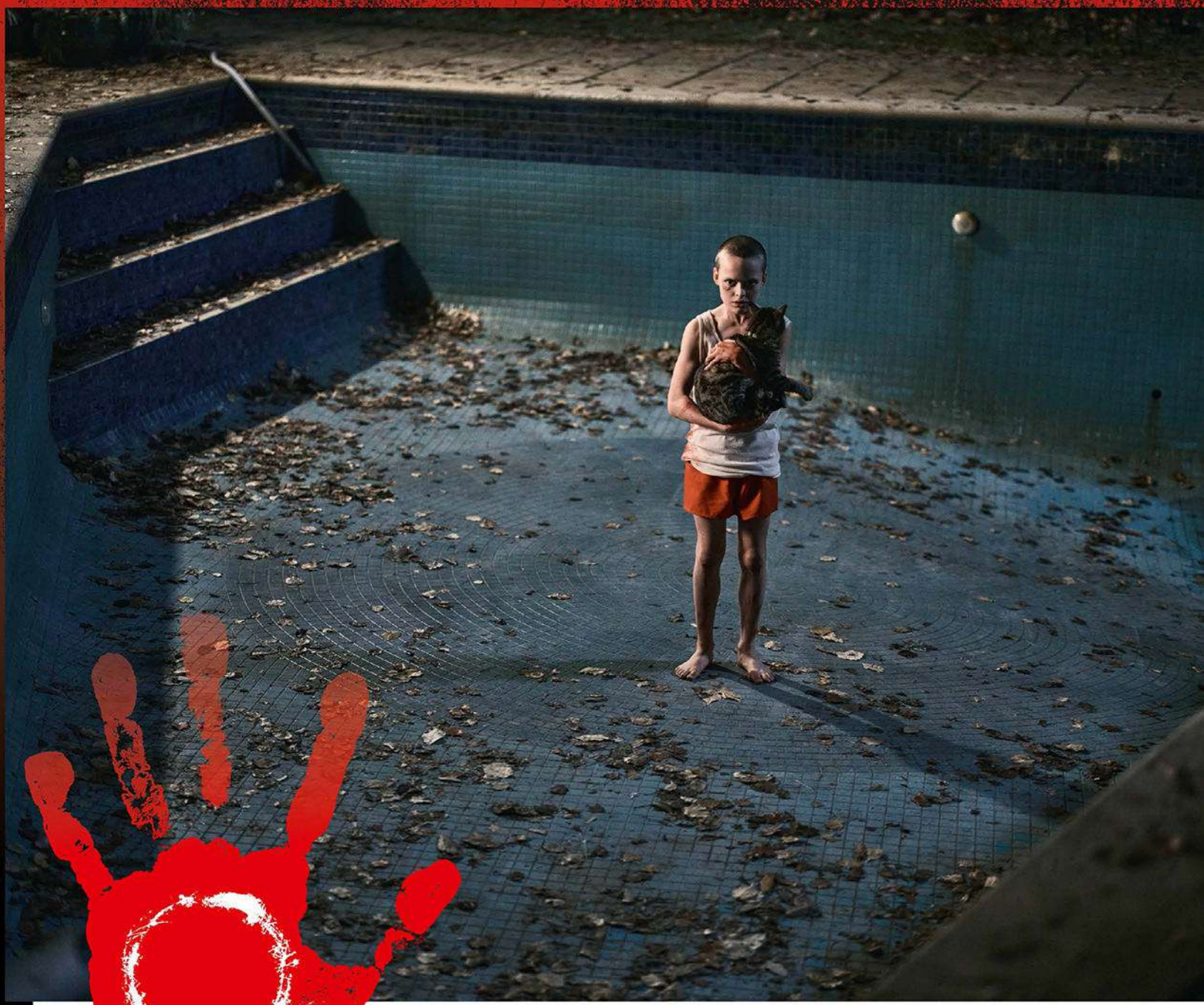
RAISING

WITH *TALK TO ME*, DANNY AND MICHAEL PHILIPPOU WENT FROM YOUTUBE UPSTARTS TO HORROR HEROES. AS THEY

HELL

RETURN WITH **BRING HER BACK**, WE MEET THE DIRECTOR DUO WHO CAN'T STOP CAUSING CARNAGE

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**



MICHAEL PHILIPPOU IS stood on a platform roughly the height of a double-decker bus. A big, burly man throws him over his shoulder in a fireman's lift. A crowd watches on, breaths held, phones poised. The man leaps off the platform, plunging Philippou through the air, down into a plate of glass — on *actual fire* — propped between two fold-out chairs. Shards fly in every direction. The crowd yells in unison: "*Ohhhhhhh!*"

Over a year later, Michael has a confession. "I wasn't *technically* on *Bring Her Back*. They couldn't insure me, or something," he says, as his identical twin brother Danny puts away the phone on which he's just shown *Empire* that bonkers footage. Such is life when you're a rising director with a side-hustle in 'deathmatch wrestling'. Welcome to the world of the Philippou brothers, aka RackaRacka, aka one of the most exciting filmmaking duos in the world right now.

Fittingly, watching the films made by the 32-year-old Australians, who rose up making mayhem-fuelled YouTube videos, feels somewhat akin to being pummelled through a flaming glass plate — full-throated features that slam you head-first into grief and demonic possession. In 2023, they unleashed the soul-rattling *Talk To Me*, in which hard-partying Aussie teens are terrorised after toying with an embalmed hand that channels deceased spirits. Now they return with *Bring Her Back*, another hair-raising possession tale that goes even deeper and darker.

It's a film that challenged them like never before. And not just because Michael was enrolled in a deathmatch ("They use thumbtacks, barbed wire, they get really bloody," he explains) in Detroit just days before shooting. "Our producer sat us down," recalls Danny. "She's like, 'If your brother dies, you'll have a couple of days to grieve — and then you have to shoot *Bring Her Back*.'" The pair cackle at the absurdity of it. What can you do but stand up, brush off the glass, and head into the fray?

IN NEARLY EVERY WAY, THE PHILIPPOUS can't sit still. As they join *Empire* in a London hotel in early May, they're extraordinarily animated, jetlag be damned. They regularly hijack one another's sentences. At one point, Danny leaps off the sofa to demonstrate some interaction between himself and lead actor Sally Hawkins on set of *Bring Her Back*.

That restlessness is reflected in their creative output too. After *Talk To Me* became an instant horror smash for A24, the production company swiftly greenlit a sequel, for which the brothers currently have two competing scripts. They have another original horror screenplay in the works too, and a deathmatch-wrestling documentary is well underway (hence Michael's daring feat).

Clockwise from main: Foster child Oliver (Jonah Wren Phillips) is not happy. Cat's mood unconfirmed; Bereaved mum Laura (Sally Hawkins) has a (very) dark side; Directors Michael and Danny Philippou, supervising the terror; Laura gets too close to Piper (Sora Wong); Andy (Billy Barratt) gets an eyeful.

All of those plates were spinning concurrently with the production of *Bring Her Back*, itself written in tandem with *Talk To Me*. "When you hit a roadblock on one movie, you go to another one, so you can keep making progress on something, and then you come back and revisit it," Danny explains of his writing process (he scripted both films with his writing partner Bill Hinzman). Having spent five years devoted to *Talk To Me*, the Philippous wanted to channel their energies elsewhere before shooting the sequel.

Bring Her Back, though, is its "spiritual successor", says Michael. Like their debut, it features grounded characters who have suffered life's hardships — brother and sister Andy (Billy Barratt) and Piper (Sora Wong), who unexpectedly lose their dad and enter the care system. They're taken in by Sally Hawkins' Laura, herself reeling from the death of her daughter. And like *Talk To Me*, it soon becomes clear that something sinister is at play, with dead spirits, demonic entities, and bursts of stomach-churning body horror. "It *is* different," notes Danny. "It's a different energy, a different vibe. A little more character-focused."

In fact, part of the brothers' nervous energy is exactly that: nerves. *Bring Her Back* is, purposely, a change of pace for them. "It's a slow boil," Michael says. "[Our] YouTube instincts are like, 'Ka-kow! Boom boom boom!' It was a terrifying thing [to slow down]. Sometimes I watch the film and I'm like, 'Am I boring people?' It's a scary thing to judge." Safe to say, *Bring Her Back* is not boring — it's another raw exploration of loss with nerve-shredding consequences, that rises to a fever pitch in its final act. There's an extra maturity, a deeper sadness, to its characterisations. Which was exactly the point. "We're so obsessed with *In Treatment*," says Danny of HBO's therapy-session drama. "The characters are so real that someone throwing a cup of water on someone else feels like an explosion going off. I love going into our writing, like, 'Let's make those characters feel so real that if someone threw a glass of water on someone, it would be a big deal.'" Make no mistake: in *Bring Her Back*, more than a glass of water is thrown.

IT TAKES AN ENERGY AS INFECTIOUS AS

that of the Philippou brothers to draw Sally Hawkins towards the dark side. This is an actor whose general demeanour is so happy-go-lucky, she was literally the star of *Happy-Go-Lucky*; and who found eternal beauty in fish form in Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape Of Water*. But *Bring Her Back* took her to an entirely different register.

"She's terrifying in the movie," says Michael, with which his brother agrees: "When she's in that zone, playing a horror thing, even the crew was scared to approach her." Not what you'd expect from Paddington's mum. "There have been so many comments saying, 'What happened between *Paddington 2* and *3*?!'" laughs Michael. (Maybe this is why *Paddington In Peru* saw Emily Mortimer step in.)

As Laura, Hawkins still elicits sympathy — you get the sense that she was once as great ›

a mum to her late daughter Cathy as she has been on screen to Paddington and Willy Wonka. Except, the chasm left by that loss has sent Laura spiralling, twisting her maternal, nurturing side into an occult obsession. "She's dealing with it in the wrong way," says Michael. "If she couldn't let go, what does that mean?" It's a role that needed someone like Hawkins, whose inherent ebullience could belie such cavernous darkness.

That contrast of joyous highs and devastating lows is pure Philippou. Right before *Talk To Me* careens into full-blown-nightmare territory, it delivers a giddy party sequence as its gaggle of teens experience drug-like highs from brief dalliances with the embalmed hand. *Bring Her Back*, too, offers up a spot of rowdy, drunken karaoke before revealing its harrowing horrors.

The brothers are the same. They are exuberant company, but there is real pain poured into their material. "It's looking at really uncomfortable memories, and expressing them in a way," says Danny, explaining how his and Michael's narrative instincts let them plunge their characters into deep, personal hells. "What are the things that make us uncomfortable? And then what's a way that we can express that without having to talk about it? The art is the expression of that."

The pair have experienced significant loss over the years. "When we were 13, our grandfather helped raise us," Danny recounts. "When we came home one day, he had passed away. I still so vividly remember our dad trying to give him CPR, and the vomit stuck in his beard." Then, during the early scripting stages of both *Talk To Me* and *Bring Her Back*, they faced a major family tragedy when their cousin lost her two-year-old child. And before cameras rolled on *Bring Her Back*, their family friend Harley Wallace died, in his early 20s; the movie is dedicated to him.

"There was no way to process that, except for the film," says Danny. "We literally couldn't do anything. We were on set. The movie had to go on. You're hit with this thing, and there's nowhere to put those emotions. [*Bring Her Back*] felt more expressive, sometimes, than *Talk To Me*, because the script changed while we were making it. Scenes that were shot to be scary ended up being really sad."

The light in the darkness of *Bring Her Back* is the sibling relationship between Andy and Piper — he the protective older brother, trying to paint the world in a rosier light than it is; she the partially sighted younger sister, keen to prove she can be more independent. It's impossible not to see the Philippous' boisterous energy echoed in Andy and Piper's scrappily playful bond, although they say it reflects how they are with their sister, Helene. "[She's] very rough-house with us," points out Danny. "We like that Piper is jumping on Andy's back and choking him out in their drinking sequence." Piper, too, vocalises a fondness for attacking her brother where it hurts. "We know someone's little sister who was always about kicking her brother in the balls," Danny explains. "Naturally it comes across."

The other way the Philippous exorcise their demons? With sheer brute force. *Talk To Me*

Left: In deep: Laura mourns dead daughter Cathy in *Bring Her Back*. **Here:** If looks could kill. **Below:** Bathtime gets intense; Escape to the country. **Below right, top to bottom:** Sophie Wilde as Mia in 2023's *Talk To Me*; A possessed Riley (Joe Bird) in the same film.

was kinetically gnarly: just see the moment in which young Riley (Joe Bird) smashes his head repeatedly into a table after being overtaken by a malevolent entity. *Bring Her Back*, similarly, will have viewers cowering — one moment, destined to be known as 'the kitchen scene', puts a very sharp knife to very bad use.

"Everyone's very touchy with their eyes, everyone's very touchy with their teeth," says Michael, looking back on the facial trauma doled out across their features. At one point in the edit, *Bring Her Back*'s kitchen scene wasn't hitting the spot. "The sound design doesn't feel real enough," Michael thought, before taking matters into his own hands. "I got a knife, and I was like—" He mimics gnashing on the blade, clashing metal on teeth. "Chomp on the knife! Even doing it, I was like, '*Eurgh*.'"

This is a point of contention between the brothers. "A butter knife," Danny interjects. Which still doesn't sound pleasant. But Michael isn't having it. "It wasn't a blunt knife, but yeah," he retorts. "I wasn't cutting into my lips or anything." Either way, the result is horrifying — an example of their golden rule of gore: "If you think of it and it makes you shudder inside, it'll make you shudder on screen," says Danny.

THE PHILIPPOUS HAVE SOMETHING OF

a possession obsession. That both *Talk To Me* and *Bring Her Back* deal with the notion of earthly bodies hiding unearthly entities is no coincidence. "It's the best sub-genre in horror, for me," asserts Danny. It goes right back to their earliest horror memory, watching *Alien 3*. "What terrified me wasn't the aliens, but that there was an alien inside one of the guy's bodies," says Danny. "That scared the fuck out of me, the idea that this thing had taken over. Because it was rooted in a reality. I was seeing a human being affected, as opposed to just a monster." The flesh-searing power of acid blood was the cherry on top. "I remember thinking, 'Oh my God. Does that mean blood's gonna acid through the ceiling and drop on *me*?'" recalls Michael. "Does that mean it's gonna sink through all my bones and my blood and I'm gonna *die*?"

Their horror education exploded from there — moving onto *The Exorcist* and *Evil Dead* — peaking with a panic-inducing trip to see 2003's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake. The brothers speak of a mythical 'Jenny', "this lady" who would take them to see horror films on the big screen, rated way above their actual age. "I hit my limit," says Michael. "I had to run out of the cinema, I got so fucking scared. It said, 'Based on a true story', and I'm like, 'Oh my God, this *happened*?!'" Danny had more fortitude. "I remember being embarrassed," he laughs. "Michael runs out of the cinema, and I'm like, 'I'm so sorry about him.'"

That horror obsession has more than paid off. Recently, the brothers were invited by Sam Raimi himself to visit the set of *Send Help*, his first horror film since 2009's *Drag Me To Hell*. "I had a seat next to him, and I was like (*gasps*)," beams Danny. "Just completely melting down and fanning out. It just seemed so impossible." And after Peter Jackson saw *Talk To Me*, he sent the brothers a letter of congratulations. "I froze," Danny says. "I was so overwhelmed that I didn't write back to him. I was like, 'I don't want to waste his time!'" Growing up, the *Lord Of The Rings* 'making of's were "like heaven" to the pair. One day, they envisage themselves making a seismic epic of their own. After all, Jackson began with the blood-soaked *Bad Taste* and *Braindead*. "We'd love to do a project that all-encompasses our life for ten years. That seems like the dream," says Danny.

Right now, the Philippous' next paths are many. There is, of course, 'Talk To Me 2', itself a fork in the road: the two possible scripts each "focus on different characters, different plots", says Michael. They'll soon revisit them and see which take they prefer. Also, they seem set on making one more original, another horror film, Danny says, teasing another mixed-media flourish on that one after *Talk To Me*'s smartphone lens, and *Bring Her Back*'s scuzzy VHS ritual tapes: "I'm still so in love with the genre, I have so much stuff I want to express."

Beyond that, more variety awaits. "We've got an action film," says Michael. "An animation. A bunch of different things." And, lest we forget, *that* deathmatch-wrestling documentary. Perhaps that's the biggest lesson the Philippous learned in the making of *Bring Her Back* — as well as the fact that they "regret filming the whole thing in the rain. Rain is so hard to film!" — that maybe you shouldn't be slammed through a flaming pane of glass just before you shoot a movie.

"We're never gonna do that again," says Michael. Except, he's not talking about the wrestling itself. "Two being filmed at the same time," he clarifies. Sometimes, you can't help but raise a little hell. "Oh, and on the record — it wasn't a blunt knife," Michael gets in, one last time. "It was a *real knife*!"

***BRING HER BACK* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 AUGUST**

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THIS MONTH

THE BARBARIAN BROTHERS

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

THE RED DRESS

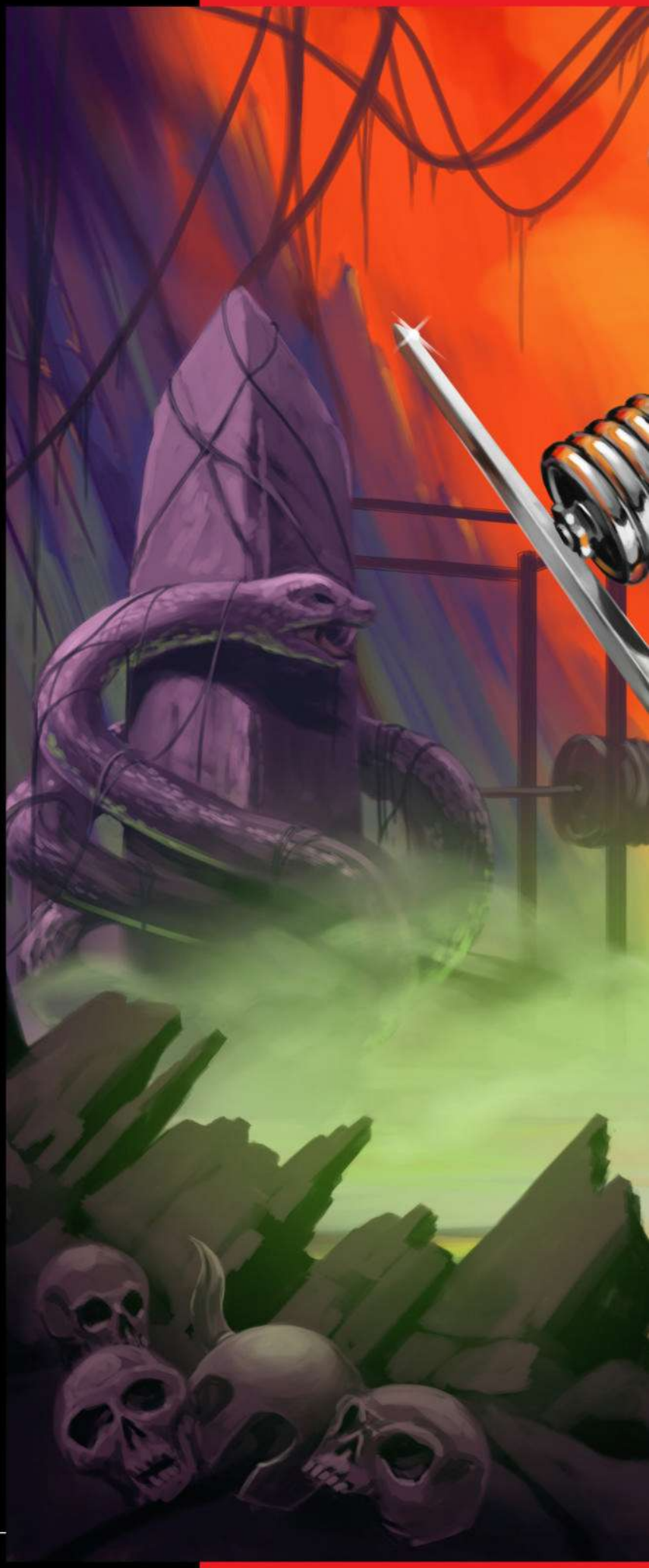
THE PRITIKIN LONGEVITY CENTER, a wellness retreat in Santa Monica, was a pristine place for pristine people. It was where LA's movie stars — and just plain rich folk — rushed when they needed help shifting the pounds. John Candy would spend the entire month of April 1984 there, to lose bulk for the movie *Summer Rental*.

It was usually a serene place, its affluent residents rising with the sun each morning for an early jog. But at the dawn of the '80s, that serenity would be abruptly, frequently disrupted, thanks to the very non-Pritikin-ish behaviour of two people who lived opposite the Center. As those dieters ran down the sun-dappled Ocean Avenue, they would — to their horror — hear bestial retching sounds, then see torrents of yellow liquid cascading down from above, splashing onto the street.

"Here would come this Pritikin exercise class, all sparkling in their matching warm-up outfits with the logo, every damn one of them existing on maybe half a calorie a day," laughed Peter Paul, one of the two gigantic, identical-looking men responsible for the mess. "And just as they'd get opposite our apartment, we'd both come dashing out and puke over the railing of our balcony."

That yellow liquid: a cocktail of 36 eggs, which had been chucked into a blender along with ice-cream and a half-gallon of milk. To be clear: that's 36 eggs consumed by Peter, then another 36 by his twin brother David. Sometimes the mixture would stay in their stomachs. Sometimes it wouldn't. "Now *that* taught them something about nutrition," Peter chortled, recalling the dismayed reactions of the Pritikiners years later.

These incidents give a taste of the unique mischief of the Pauls. Or, as they became better known, the Barbarian Brothers. Two bodybuilders who arrived in Hollywood, somehow simultaneously ultra-rowdy and ultra-disciplined, determined to remould cinema in their image. They would ›



Swords 'n' siblings: The Paul brothers lock blades in *The Barbarians* (1987).

prove to live up to both their nickname and their oft-repeated motto.

"NOT TILL YOU CRY. TRAIN TILL YOU DIE."

Their gruesome egg cocktails were typical of the Barbarian Brothers' barbaric approach to training. Born in Connecticut in 1957 — David arrived three minutes earlier and would grow to be an inch taller than Peter at 6'1", pretty much the only way to tell them apart — they rocked up in Los Angeles in 1979 with $90 between them. Following the lead of Arnold Schwarzenegger and setting up shop in Gold's Gym, they did things differently to your average bodybuilder. They wore street clothes: denim, flannel shirts, work boots. They gobbled junk food. They screamed and shouted, like unruly kids with 20½-inch necks and 59-inch chests. "Peter and David don't really train," wrote a *Sports Illustrated* journalist. "They rampage."

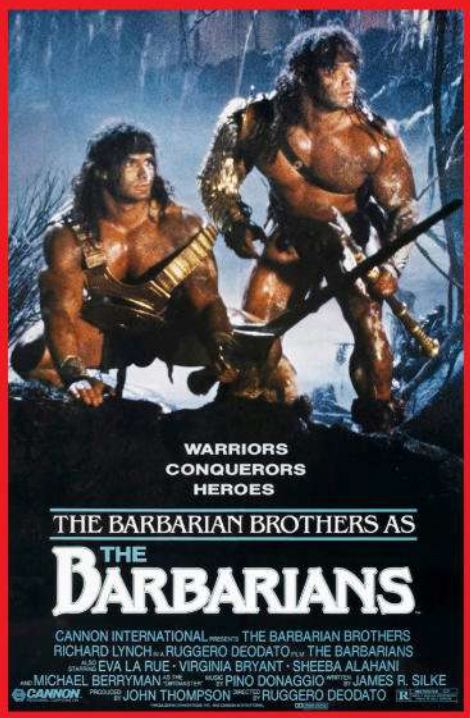
As children they had been actual unruly kids: when a nursery-school teacher yelled at Peter for an infraction, David leaped on her and bit her leg, getting expelled. Now they carried that rebellious spirit into the already wild world of Californian fitness. They turned up at Gold's each day atop a single motorcycle, like cartoon characters. It drew attention: "People stared at us as if we were Martians," said David. When a man in a Ferrari beeped at them, they dismounted and poured chocolate milk all over his luxury car.

Inevitably, they got the attention of the press. "They make the Terminator look like Alistair Cooke," wrote one journalist in the mid-'80s. Another dubbed them "the Cheech and Chong of the iron game". "They make Arnold Schwarzenegger look anaemic. By comparison, Sylvester Stallone is undernourished," gasped a reporter who met them face to face.

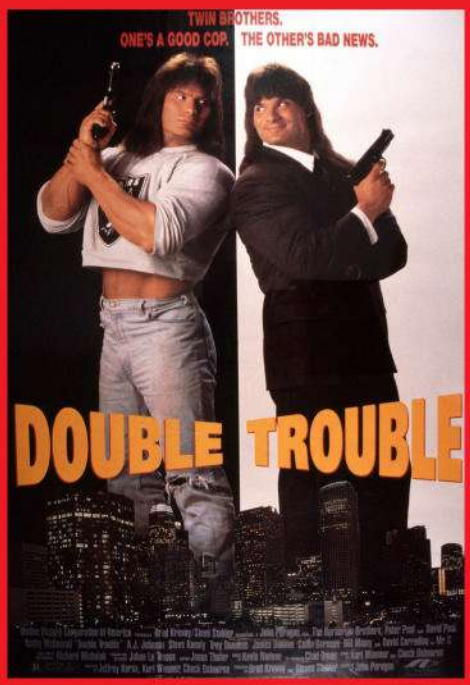
As it happened, in the mid-1980s Hollywood was looking to capitalise on the huge success of *Conan The Barbarian*. And here were a pair of monstrous twins, one hell of a USP. David and Peter Paul had even done a *Sports Illustrated* shoot in character as weapon-wielding savages, under the headline 'Honin' The Barbarians'. Their own appetite to break into movies, meanwhile, was voracious. When they had first arrived in LA, they had mailed Stallone a photo of themselves wielding machine guns, later claiming it had inspired him to make *First Blood*. "We're very smart," David concluded of that. And of their general ambition, they told the *Los Angeles Times*: "We're built better than Schwarzenegger, we're as funny as Eddie Murphy and we're twins, on top of everything else. How can we not draw box office?"

The same rhetorical question was being asked in the offices of Cannon Films. It's unknown whether Cannon's infamous co-founder, Menahem Golan, the Louis B. Mayer of trash cinema, had seen the Pauls' prior screen work: their debut appearance in Joel Schumacher's *D.C. Cab* (1983) as musclebound taxi drivers; their turn in Garry Marshall's *The Flamingo Kid* (1984) as musclebound security guards; their role in an episode of *Knight Rider* as musclebound henchmen; them bench-pressing Merv Griffin on his talk show. But Golan had seen the July 1986 issue of *Playgirl*, featuring a "two-fisted 'pectorial'" with the Barbarian Brothers flexing their wares.

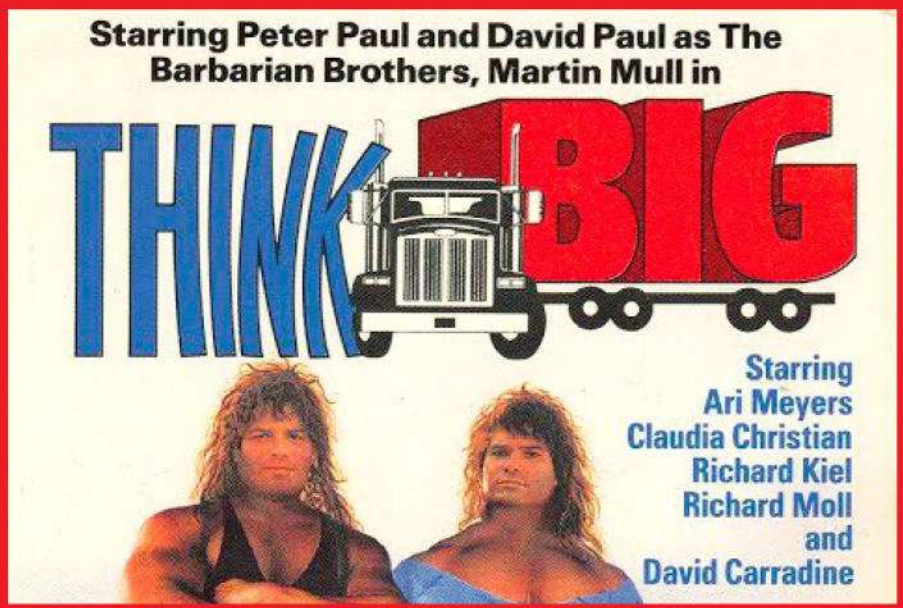
They were whisked to Cannon HQ for a general meeting. There, rampaging into a conference room that couldn't have been less familiar territory — clad in headbands, baggy sweatshirts, tall cowboy boots and fringed


WARRIORS
CONQUERORS
HEROES
THE BARBARIAN BROTHERS AS
THE BARBARIANS
CANNON INTERNATIONAL presents THE BARBARIAN BROTHERS
RICHARD LYNCH as RUGGERO DEODATO in THE BARBARIANS
also starring EVA LA RUE · VIRGINIA BRYANT · SHEEBA ALAHANI
and MICHAEL BERRYMAN as the DWEEB
Music by PINO DONAGGIO Written by JAMES R. SILKE
CANNON Produced by JOHN THOMPSON Directed by RUGGERO DEODATO R

Left: The film's glistening poster. **Here:** Making 1983's *D.C. Cab* with Gary Busey and Mr. T. **Below left:** Packing heat on 1992's *Double Trouble* one-sheet.



Above, top to bottom: Lunge-off! The twins as *The Barbarians*' Kutchek and Gore; Bicep-off! Kutchek vs. Jacko (George Eastman). **Below:** 1989's *Think Big*.



jackets — they boomed at Golan that they had written a script about their lives called 'Better Than One', which would outgross even Cannon's lucrative Chuck Norris flicks. Golan nixed it but signed them up to a two-picture deal.

Cannon had had success before by dropping weightlifters into a sword-and-sorcery movie. In 1983, the company had made *Hercules* with Lou Ferrigno, launching the film by putting a cape-wearing Ferrigno in a Roman chariot, pulled behind two white horses down Sunset Boulevard. The promo stunt hadn't gone particularly well — a policeman pulled the star over for not displaying a registration plate on his chariot — but the film had done business, well enough to get a 1985 sequel. And this time Cannon had *two* brawny heroes. Double the box office? There was only one way to find out.

And so *The Barbarians* was greenlit. Much like an unauthorised chariot ride down Sunset, it would be a bumpy ride.

With zero experience of making films (though they had smashed plenty of things in front of the camera, including two windows simultaneously in *D.C. Cab*), one might imagine the Pauls would leave the creative stuff to the experts. But anyone thinking that just didn't know the Pauls.

First, the Barbarian Brothers crushed the script. It had been written by James R. Silke, the Cannon house-scribe behind *Revenge Of The Ninja* and *Ninja III: The Domination*. "When we got the screenplay, it was so bad," said David. "We thought that the only way to make it work was to make fun of it." And so they decided to turn what was intended as a *Conan*-solemn motion picture into a comedy, adding their own goofy dialogue and imagining that their characters, twin barbarians Kutchek and Gore, had time-travelled back from the present day. ("Who you calling Fatty, moosehead?" was one of their more memorable additions.) According to their later claims, the twins then invaded the wardrobe and props departments, designing their own costumes (if the skimpy threads seen on screen actually ›

count as costumes) and commissioning a company in England to design weapons.

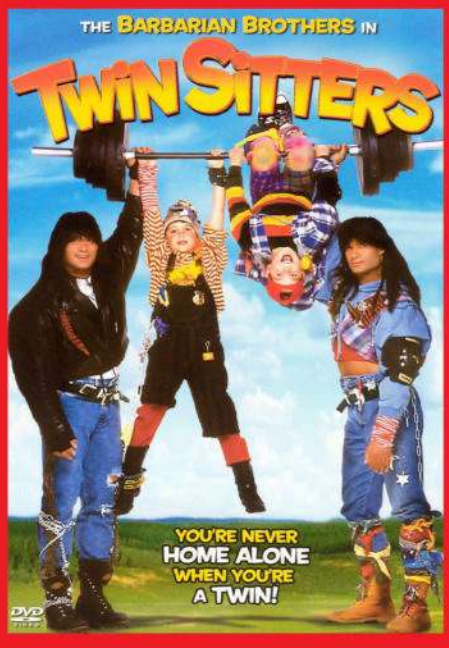
If Silke was horrified by his work being overhauled by two gym bros, he was in no position to ask his boss for help. Because by all accounts, the director of *The Barbarians* was barely able to speak English.

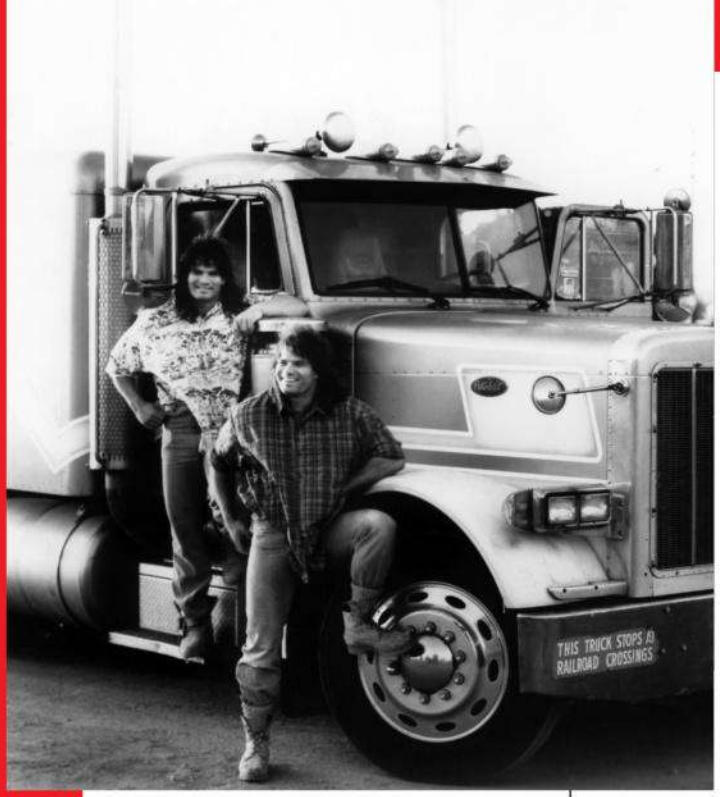
Ruggero Deodato will always be most famous for making *Cannibal Holocaust*, the 1980 chiller that saw him arrested for murder due to the film's deaths being too convincing (he had to talk an Italian court through how he'd done the special effects). But a few years later he was down on his luck enough to have to sign up for a low-budget Cannon fantasy movie, replacing original director Slobodan Šijan, who was fired for mysterious reasons after scouting locations around the mountains of Abruzzo in Southern Italy. Deodato would explain that Cannon called him because they wanted their heroes strong "like a cannibal".

But even he could not harness the chaotic energy of the Pauls, who, sharing a limo into Rome with Deodato on their first day in the country, spontaneously dropped their trousers and mooned some Italian cops. One day on set, the director reportedly charged up to them as they worked out between takes and yelled, "Pump up, pump up! My God, you're fucking huge! What is wrong with you?" It's very possible that he did not realise his film was being turned into a comedy even as it was happening, though a frustrated Cannon publicity person was finally moved to release an extraordinary statement, saying, "No-one is downplaying the brothers' contribution to the film, but I'm told that Deodato does speak some English."

It could be argued that *The Barbarians* would be best enjoyed by someone who does not speak any English at all. Replete with lines such as "Hurry! Bring all the virgins!", a phallic-looking dragon, a magical ruby (the 'Bellystone') that must be inserted into women's belly buttons to select a new queen, and a scene in which the Pauls get laid in front of their own adoptive mother, while she's trapped in a cage (quite possibly cinema's worst-ever rescue mission), it has a peculiar melange of tones and is almost impossible to follow. The Pauls, who look like a pair of jacked Corey Feldmans and swagger around paying little heed to anything going on, give performances best described as oaken. But even so, there is something very charming about their

Above: Hi-jinx in the high(ish)-concept *Twin Sitters* (1994). **Below:** The poster spells it out.





Above: Peter and David making 1989's *Think Big*, the directorial debut of Jon Turteltaub.

unearned confidence. Whenever they rip an apple in two with their bare hands or break into laughter, a bizarre sound which resembles that of a distressed moose, the movie comes alive.

Their co-stars would have conflicting memories of working with them. Michael Berryman, the iconic villain of *The Hills Have Eyes* and a weird antagonist named the Dirtmaster in *The Barbarians*, told *The Cannon Film Guide* that, "David and Peter Paul were charming to a point, but between the steroids and the raging, and the childish behaviour, it sometimes got ridiculous."

Eva LaRue, on the other hand, a first-time film actor who would go on to do a seven-year stint on *CSI: Miami*, called Deodato "a horrible, horrible little man", but was delighted by the Pauls. "They would squabble with each other all the time, but it was more like Laurel and Hardy," she recalled, also to *The Cannon Film Guide*. "I will never, never forget when they were getting ready for a scene one time... Somebody had their Volkswagen bug parked near the set. One of them walked over to the bumper of the bug, and started bicep-curling the bumper of the car. The car! It was crazy — that's how strong these guys were."

They may have been able to lift cars, but alas, the Barbarian Brothers could not hoist their own epic to triumph. Despite a high-energy tagline ("The bad boys of bodybuilding! Feel the power!"), lurid posters, and the Pauls driving around Hollywood asking passers-by to go see their movie, the $2.5 million budget film made just $800,000 in the US.

The execs at Cannon were likely unbothered. After all, they released over 30 films in 1987, including *Masters Of The Universe*, *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace*, and Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* (sadly their recently announced *Captain America* film, to be directed by Michael Winner, had fallen apart over budget issues). For them, *The Barbarians* was just another chunk of content.

For David and Peter Paul, though, *The Barbarians* was the end of a dream. They would not be rivals to Eddie Murphy or Arnold Schwarzenegger, after all. That question, "How can we not draw box office?", had been answered, and not in the way they'd hoped for. They stayed chipper, becoming the first Razzie nominees ever to show up at the ignominious awards show (nominated for Worst New Star, they lost to *Over The Top*'s David Mendenhall), and refused to give up: there would be three more Barbarian Brothers movies released between 1989 and 1994. In *Think Big*, the first film by future *National Treasure* director Jon Turteltaub, they played truckers who get mixed up with some toxic waste. In *Double Trouble*, David was a cop, Peter a criminal. And in the truly high-concept *Twin Sitters,* the brothers would babysit a pair of twin kids (two pairs of twins!), even rapping the theme song, 'Whatcha' Lookin' At'. Their on-screen enthusiasm remained high, with their shirts repeatedly getting ripped off at key moments to reveal their still-honed pecs. But these were niche propositions, cult movies that played to smaller and smaller audiences. Unfairly, *Double Impact*, the 1991 Jean-Claude Van Damme picture that used trickery to have him play twin brothers, blazed past them to make $30 million.

Their father's idea of creating a theme park inspired by *The Barbarians* never bore fruit. And the final indignity came in 1994, when Oliver Stone cut a cameo he had filmed with them from *Natural Born Killers*. Playing the Hun Brothers, David and Paul had sat in a gym, telling Robert Downey Jr's interviewer how murderous protagonists Mickey and Mallory had cut one of each of their legs off, and comparing them to Schwarzenegger psyching out Ferrigno in *Pumping Iron*. They had been pleased with their performances, and it hurt when they were left wilting on the cutting-room floor.

The late '90s saw them retire from the screen for good, although David can be glimpsed in a scene in the bodybuilders episode of *Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends*. He focused on photography, releasing a book of bodybuilding imagery. In 2020, David died in his sleep, two days before the twins' 63rd birthday. Peter, meanwhile, has been seen drifting around the campus of the University of Rhode Island, calling himself 'the Knight of the Light' and reciting peculiar poetry. Separated at last — even at the height of their fame they lived in houses only a mile apart — it's the sad end of one of cinema's strangest double-acts.

Still, the Barbarian Brothers live on in the form of their films. Their bravado, their sheer chutzpah, still wafts off the screen like pungent aftershave, and pleasingly, it survived intact throughout the decades, no matter how many dings they endured. "I've always been an artist in a muscle suit," said David to DreadCentral.com in his final interview. "To me, it was all crap. Peter and I were funny, and we held those movies together. There were stars in our movies, but you would always focus on us."

How could you not?

GO FIGURE

THE BARBARIAN BROTHERS' VITAL STATS

28

Size of their thighs in inches, prompting David to say, "On the day we decide to show our legs, people will cry."

500

Weight, in pounds, of David's signature bench press, done with a reverse grip. In 1982 he demonstrated it at an exhibition at Disneyland.

0

Bodybuilding titles they won. Unlike their burly peers, they refused to enter competitions such as Mr Universe or Mr Olympia. Although they liked the sound of a new contest called 'Mr Infinity'.

3,000,000

People who bought a copy of their *Sports Illustrated* cover story in summer 1982.

184

Words in the baffling narration at the start of *The Barbarians*, explaining how an enchanted ruby contains "the secrets of music, of joyful laughter, of human kindness".

1

Album released by the Barbarian Brothers: the soundtrack to *Twin Sitters*. Its songs include 'You're Full Of Bologna', 'At War With The Weights' and 'Shut Up'. But sadly not the rap they wrote for *Think Big*, with Bond villain Richard Kiel on backing vocals.

Alamy, Getty Images, Mary Evans, Photofest

final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

JULY 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

The Star-Spangled Man

TALKING RUNNING AND RED HULK WITH **CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD** DIRECTOR JULIUS ONAH

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

JULIUS ONAH IS exhausted, and it's not hard to see why. The last few years of his life have been dedicated to directing *Captain America: Brave New World*, the 35th movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the first to solely spotlight Anthony Mackie as the new Cap, Sam Wilson. It's a movie that sees Wilson do a lot of running, and Onah — a big proponent of pavement-pounding — would have loved to follow suit. "I'm trying to get back my running mojo," he tells *Empire* over a Zoom from his home in Berlin. "These movies take a lot out of you. I tried to go for a run this morning, and I'm just like, 'I want to nap.'"

Onash's solid MCU entry sees Sam and his new sidekick, Danny Ramirez's Joaquín Torres, stuck in the middle of a conspiracy that leads to newly minted US President Thaddeus Ross (Harrison Ford) turning into the Red Hulk. *Empire* caught up with the director (who has also directed the likes of 2018's *The Cloverfield Paradox* and the 2019 indie drama *Luce*) just before *Brave New World* hit Disney+ and shiny discs everywhere, and just after it had been supplanted by *Thunderbolts** as the newest Marvel Studios movie...

This is how quickly the MCU moves. *Brave New World* is no longer the most recent MCU movie. Now that it's somewhat in your rear view mirror, how are things for you?
Things are good. You pour so much into these movies, but at the end of the day you're making it a) for the fans, and b) as part of a continuity that's much larger. So you know the next episode is going to come in, and then the next episode after that. Right now it's *Thunderbolts** and in a couple of months *Fantastic Four*, and then before you know it, another *Avengers* movie. You get to contribute to one chapter, but the story continues. It's actually pretty cool.

How much of a challenge was it for you to come into this giant machine, and make your voice heard?
I think with any movie that's part of a big franchise like this, or just any movie that's part of the studio system, there's always going to be a certain

Red menace: New Cap Sam Wilson (Anthony Mackie) and a Hulked-up Thaddeus Ross (Harrison Ford). **Below:** Japanese PM Ozaki (Takehiro Hira) with Wilson and Ross. **Far left:** Director Julius Onah and cinematographer Kramer Morgenthau on set.

amount of navigating of the process that you have to do, in terms of dealing with other voices and perspectives and points of view. I kind of came in with eyes wide open. This was movie number 35, our movie. You're part of a much bigger universe. So you come in and you offer your point of view, which is what I did from the beginning of the process when I was being interviewed. I walked into this with a very specific set of targets of, "These are the things that are interesting to me. How do I help shape those things?"

What's the thing that's most personal to you that you managed to smuggle into this giant behemoth of a movie?
I don't feel like it was a smuggle. The dynamic ›

between Sam and Joaquin, and the dynamic between Sam and Isaiah [Bradley, played by Carl Lumbly], were two things that were really important to me. The sort of emotional authenticity of what those relationships needed to be, and also what it meant to be each one of those characters as a first of sorts, Sam being a first in terms of who he is as Captain America, Isaiah being a forgotten first, and Joaquin being something of a first. And that really informed that final scene between Sam and Joaquin. So that was a thing that, fortunately, I didn't have to really smuggle in, but I was very proud to be able to do that work with those actors.

That scene between Sam and Joaquin, where Joaquin reveals that he has always looked up to Sam, is the final scene of the movie. Can you talk about leaving the movie in that way?
That was not necessarily intended to be the last scene of the movie when it was first written. But I remember writing the scene and rehearsing it for the first time with Danny and Anthony, because we had a couple of weeks of rehearsal right before we started shooting. A lot of the dramatic scenes were the things that were shot up front at the very top of the movie, so it almost felt a little bit like getting a chance to be in theatre. And from the first time they read the scene together, I was like, "Oh, I know exactly what this is." In fact, that rehearsal ended up turning into maybe about 45 minutes of us just goofing around and hanging out, which was also really important, because that's when the actors are getting to know each other and let their guards down. And I'm getting to know them as well. I'd spent time with Danny before this movie, Anthony I got to know better. The scenes were written very specifically with those guys in mind. You have a guy who's been in this universe, in Anthony, and you've got a young man in Danny who's just coming in. So there's a way that it's a conversation between Anthony and Danny as much as a conversation between Sam and Joaquin.

It's interesting that you end the movie on that intimate moment. And while you have that big action sequence at the end with Red Hulk, you also finish that with a very intimate exchange between Sam and Harrison Ford's Ross, two guys who are on completely different sides of the divide, but somehow manage to find a way through it.
That's where I'm coming from. I studied theatre as my first degree, and love working with actors. Look, you've got a movie with a guy flying around with vibranium wings, you've got a Red Hulk, I love that stuff. But it only really matters if you care on a dramatic level, and on a thematic level, about the human side of it. In thinking about Sam and thinking about what he would represent as a Captain America, and what's so powerful about the idea of him wearing the Stars And Stripes, is this notion of it representing a kind of progress, and to renew this idea that a group of disparate people can come together and share a vision and sense of hope and possibility. I know that sounds a little Pollyannaish, but if we aren't believing in a shared vision of a world or nation or community, what are we doing?

The movie literally begins with a shot of the word "together".
You know, as you edit a movie, things sometimes shift around, but that was always designed as the opening. It was a very conscious decision to try and do that, to help create a thematic through line.

Is there a world in which the Red Hulk could have been kept a secret in the publicity campaign?
I don't think so. When you're making a movie like this, an announcement goes out that Harrison Ford is going to play Thaddeus Ross, and you have a fandom as massive and as passionate as the MCU fandom is, you're toast at that point, you know? In a perfect-case scenario, it would have been awesome [if] that [had been] an in-theatre surprise, but I think it would have been very difficult. Somewhere along the way, a toy would have been found, or somebody would have leaked a trailer. It's just so hard to keep anything secret in today's day and age.

Facing page, top to bottom: He wears it well — Sam, suited and booted; Cap spreads his wings.

"It only really matters if you care about the human side."

I want to go back to the start of this movie for you. You went through a fairly extensive interview process. How long was that?
From the first conversation to when I got hired, about four to five months.

And are you fully focused on this during those months?
I had two other movies that were in progress, one that was about to go, another that was semi-close-ish to going. So it made this a somewhat tricky decision to make, when it was offered to me, but at the same time obviously a very exciting proposition. I had had conversations in the past with Marvel about a couple of other things that weren't necessarily quite the right fit. But I was really impressed by the executives on this when I first spoke to them, and then I was sent a script and then we had a subsequent conversation where I spoke in more detail about what was important to me thematically, and from a genre standpoint. And then there was a more formal conversation with Kevin [Feige] and Lou [D'Esposito] and, at that time, Victoria Alonso, and from there I was offered the gig.

For that final chat, what were the nerves like? When it's maybe you and one other person, and shit is about to get real...
You know, I had no idea who else was in the mix for the gig. And I was prepared, so nervous? Not necessarily. At the same time, you don't want to say anything goofy or stupid.

After you get the gig, what is life like?
I live in Berlin, so I had to wrap up some affairs here. They wanted me hopping on a plane right away, but I couldn't really leave for a month. So the first month of work was remote, just Zooms. It was shaping and reshaping story. And after about a month, I hopped on a plane, went there and it was full tilt, starting to hire crew, starting to pre-viz, starting to work through designs and costumes, and to rework the script.

Left, top to bottom: Mackie movie magic; Danny Ramirez — as the Falcon/Joaquín Torres — dials it up; Car trouble; Red's all the rage.

The biggest movie you'd made before this was *The Cloverfield Paradox*. Then you made *Luce*, an indie drama. So you're moving around in terms of scales.
I wish I could say there was a plan. I never thought I would come out of film school and go make a movie at Paramount, at Bad Robot. I thought I would have a career that was almost exclusively movies like *Luce*, but opportunities were put in front of me. It's very hard to get the little movies made. Those were really, really tricky to get made, especially in this day and age. So I like to work. I like to make movies. I have a broad range of tastes. The things that maybe made me want to make movies were small-scale things, but the things that first made me fall in love with movies were the *Clear And Present Danger*s, the *Indiana Jones* and the *Star Wars* of the world. So on some levels, my interests and passion are just sort of finding a way to manifest themselves in what the output is becoming. I'm just going to keep at it and see where it lands.

What's next — have you figured it out yet?
There's a couple of things I put down when I was venturing out to go make *Captain America*. One of those things was a project with Kelvin Harrison Jr on the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat. So that's percolating. And then, being back in Berlin is a very inspiring place for me. So there are things I'm imagining to shoot in Berlin or Europe in general. This is my first time back in Berlin in three years where I'm not like, "Oh my God, I have a flight to be somewhere in a week or two weeks."

What drew you to Berlin in the first place?
I ended up here for the first time in 2006, 2007. I was a film school student at NYU, and I was crashing with a friend who was like, "If you're ever in Germany, let me know." I was supposed to be in Hamburg, but I'd broken up with an ex who was from Hamburg, so I ended up in Berlin, and just fell in love with it. And I made a documentary about a guy who breeds gigantic rabbits, and inexplicably these rabbits were being sent to North Korea, to be bred to alleviate famine. And it just became this bizarre, weird geopolitical story that I made a five-minute documentary on for school, submitted it to the Berlin Film Festival, and got invited there, and then I just found myself back in Berlin, and just kept on coming back. Now I'm here.

How's the German?
It's getting better. But I need to get back to taking my German classes. I was trying to keep it up while I was making the movie, but it was very hard. Sometimes I'd wake up on a Saturday morning and be like, "Am I going to sleep in a little bit more? Am I going to study German?" And at a certain point I just have to stop and make the damn Marvel movie!

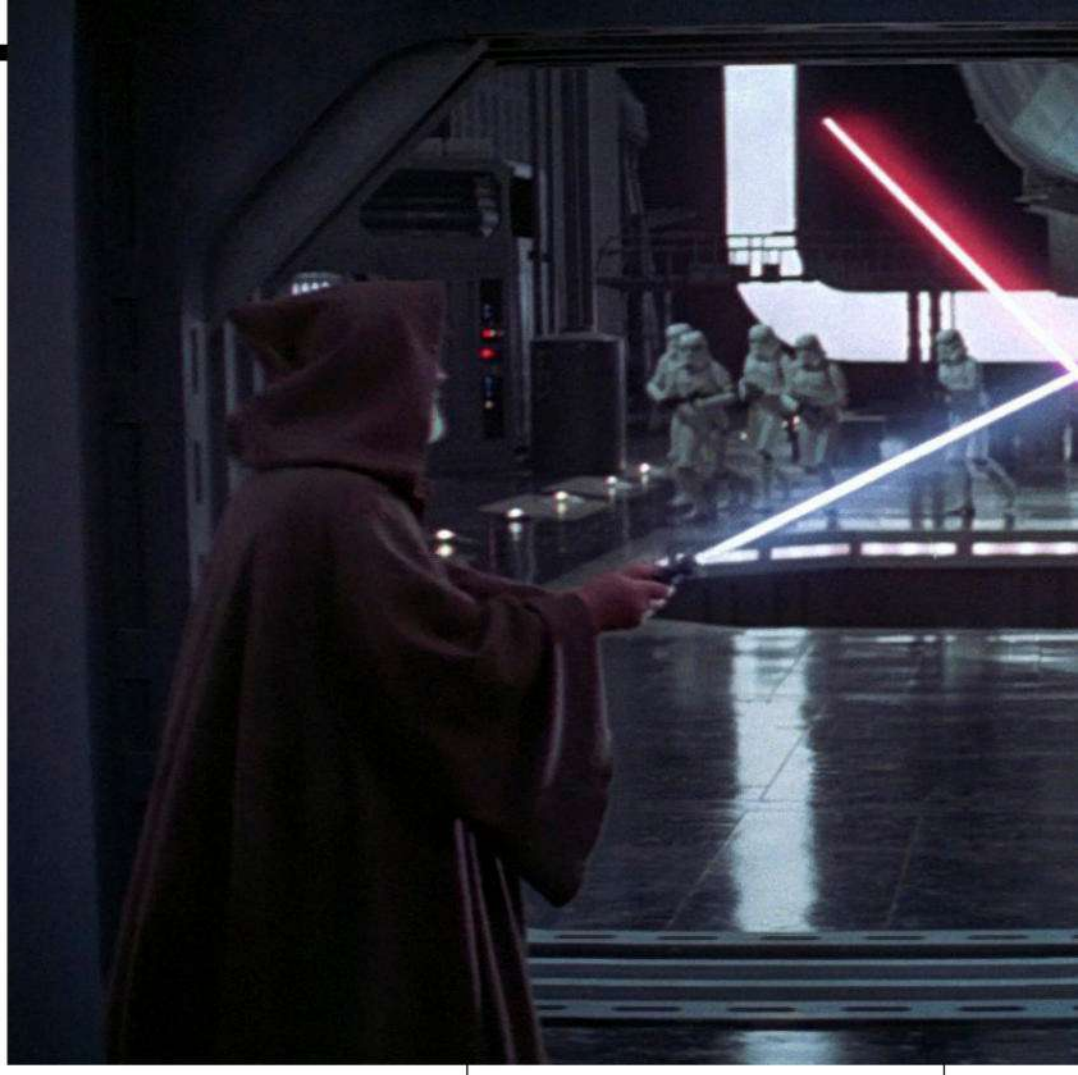
***CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD* IS OUT NOW ON DISNEY+, DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL.**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope

THE MOVIE THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

WORDS **IAN FREER**



FUN FACT: AFTER it opened on Wednesday 25 May 1977, *Star Wars* — there was no episode number or subtitle back then — lost the opening-weekend box-office battle to hicks-on-wheels comedy *Smokey And The Bandit*. The former's $1,554,475 was pipped by the latter's $1,728,060 because *Smokey* burned rubber on 498 screens while the Force was strong on just 43, a phenomenon waiting to flourish. The Burt Reynolds vehicle subsequently became a short-lived franchise — two sequels and a prequel TV series — but George Lucas' third feature created a pop-culture industrial complex, spawning the gamut from films to merch to an organised religion. Given everything that has followed since, it is easy to overlook that a long time ago (48 years) in a galaxy far, far away (your local one-screen fleapit), it was once a single, solitary film.

Creating his own universe because he couldn't obtain the rights to *Flash Gordon*, Lucas' movie thrives on the play between the old and the new. Classic story mythology filtered through a flip, hip sensibility. B-movie tropes — a Western barroom brawl, a swashbuckling pirate swing across a chasm — enriched by A-movie pizzazz. Never-heard-before sound effects mingle with a score inspired by 19th-century Romanticism. The much-vaunted visual effects blend bleeding-edge technology (motion-control cameras, optical printing, blue screen) with traditional techniques (stop-motion animation, matte paintings, a man in a suit) that are almost as old as cinema itself. Even the plot revolves around a somewhat jaded old wizard and a young farm boy experiencing the world for the first time. This dynamic between the comfort of the familiar and the thrill of the novel is at the heart of *Star Wars*' appeal.

At this point in its five-decade life cycle, there are no unsung heroes in the movie's making. Every backstage legend — concept artist Ralph McQuarrie, VFX gods ILM, composer John Williams, sound designer Ben Burtt — has been warbled more times than 'I Will Survive' at a drunken karaoke sesh. But let's try. Give it up for Bunny Alsup, a producer's assistant who, typing up Lucas' scripts, frequently formalised the inconsistent spellings of his wacky creations; Maurice Murphy, the London Symphony Orchestra trumpeter who blasted out that iconic high C of the opening fanfare; the critic Jay Cocks and Lucas' pal Brian De Palma, who rewrote the apparently baffling original opening crawl; and Pat McDermott, the hair designer who created Leia's 'buns' hairdo inspired by Mexican female revolutionaries and Native American portraits. Upending the auteur theory, *Star Wars* is the perfect synthesis of a singular, personal vision and the invaluable contributions of others.

Steven Spielberg once said Lucas was unique among their generation of filmmakers because he created impact and meaning through montage and sound rather than composition and lighting. Lucas initially hired British editor John Jympson (*A Hard Day's Night*) to cut the film while he was in Tunisia but, unhappy with Jympson's handiwork on his return to Elstree, the director fired him. Needing to hand over finished sequences so ILM could start the VFX process, Lucas hired three editors — Richard Chew (*One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*), Marcia Lucas (*Taxi Driver*) plus much later Paul Hirsch (*Carrie*) — to meet the rapidly approaching deadline.

From the judicious use of cutaways — the rebel's feet dangling by Vader's shins really sells the Dark Lord's strength — to the tension of the trash-compactor walls converging, their Oscar-winning work is impeccable. Their masterpiece remains the Death Star climax. Famously working with World War II aerial combat footage as inspiration, the set-piece was moulded in the cutting room. Luke's trench attack was condensed from two runs to one, while scenes of the Imperials preparing to fire were added to increase tension. Without ever being confusing, the build-up of images, information and excitement makes *Top Gun: Maverick* look like *Last Of The Summer Wine*.

But for all its perfectly crafted exhilaration, this is not why the picture remains so beloved. Warmth radiates from *Star Wars*, and it's not just from the twin suns. It's in the nomenclature. *Star Trek* features sci-fi-by-numbers planet names like Beta XII-A; *Star Wars* has the beautiful Tatooine and Alderaan. It's also in Lucas' silly side, summed up by the mouse robot scuttling away from Chewie's roar, or the one-eyed dianoga trash-monster puppet, the latter redolent of the filmmakers' sense of play bleeding onto the screen (also see the chess game). It's even baked into the oddly charming old-school optical dissolves between scenes — *Star Wars* courses with an infectious affection for cinema history, from serials to Akira Kurosawa to *The Searchers* to Ken Annakin adventure movies (*The Long*

Obi-Wan (Alec Guinness) and Vader's (David Prowse/James Earl Jones) Death Star duel. **Below, left to right:** "Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi..."; Leia's (Carrie Fisher) buns; Best pals Chewie (Peter Mayhew) and Han (Harrison Ford). **Bottom left:** Sinister Imperial Star Destroyers.

Lucasfilm

Duel). Hang on, Ken Annakin?

But perhaps its warm, winning qualities are most evident in its character relationships (witness how C-3P0 looks out for R2-D2 at the Jawas' yard sale). At its centre is a gang you want to join, a friendship forged in Death Star corridors. Mark Hamill gives Luke an appealing gosh-and-golly centre and Carrie Fisher lends Leia energy, but Harrison Ford's Han is the film's ace in the hole. Be it the look of disdain he gives C-3PO boarding the Falcon to the panicked improv with a Death Star comlink ("We're all fine here now, thank you... how are you?"), Ford might be *Star Wars*' biggest special effect: it's the point a relatively unknown actor becomes a star before your very eyes.

It's a film that changes as you change. As a kid, it's the Coolest Thing You've Ever Seen, but as an adult it's possible to hold in equipoise its mixture of the stirring (the opening shot) and the stupid (all that laser technology and the torture droid still employs a needle?) — and find pleasure in both. What never diminishes is the fun and the uplift. Don't forget the movie ends on a thunderous round of applause. There is little that is meta about *Star Wars*, but it's lovely to imagine all the clapping and cheering is for the film itself. After nearly 50 years, it still fully deserves it.

***STAR WARS: EPISODE IV — A NEW HOPE* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DISNEY+**

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 BLACK BAG

(OUT 16 JUNE, DVD/BR/4K)

Steven Soderbergh's stylish and sardonic spy thriller is his best movie since he came out of retirement, and one of his best movies overall. Crammed with slick David Koepp dialogue, beautiful people (Fassbender! Blanchett! Page! Harris! Brosnan!) doing beastly things, and the most awkward dinner party this side of Ben Wheatley. A must.

2 BRIDGET JONES: MAD ABOUT THE BOY

(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

I did not see this coming. Having tolerated the second Bridget Jones film and skipped the third entirely, I rolled my eyes at the prospect of having to watch Renée Zellweger (perfect British accent notwithstanding) navigate yet another love triangle. Instead, what we have is a beautiful essay in dealing with loss and grief that also manages to be a warm and witty comedy. No mean feat. And Zellweger is magnificent.

3 THE TAKING OF PELHAM ONE TWO THREE

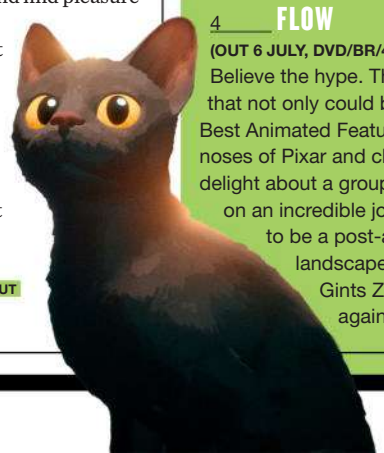
(OUT 9 JUNE, BR, 4K)

One of the great '70s thrillers sees Walter Matthau trying to navigate a hostage crisis when Robert Shaw and some bad apples seize control of a New York subway train. Hugely influential (yes, Quentin Tarantino has seen this) but never bettered, Joseph Sargent's movie is tight, tense and packed with colourful characters bickering and bantering to wonderful effect.

4 FLOW

(OUT 6 JULY, DVD/BR/4K)

Believe the hype. The little animated movie that not only could but did, stealing the Best Animated Feature Oscar from under the noses of Pixar and chums, is a dialogue-free delight about a group of animals embarking on an incredible journey in what appears to be a post-apocalyptic flooded landscape. All hail director Gints Zilbalodis for swimming against the tide.



SPOILER SPECIAL

Bridget Jones: Mad About The Boy

DIRECTOR MICHAEL MORRIS ON HOW TO KEEP UP WITH THE JONES

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

THOSE PESKY NA'VI are likely to have a say in the matter, but right now, Britain is batty for Bridget. Which is to say, *Bridget Jones: Mad About The Boy* — the fourth in the series starring Renée Zellweger as Helen Fielding's hero, now soldiering on without her late husband — is the biggest film of the year in the UK so far. "That's mad," concedes the film's director Michael Morris, who here talks *Empire* through Bridget's key quandaries.

PHANTOM FIRTH

Morris, a London-born director who had previously directed standout episodes of *Better Call Saul* and guided Andrea Riseborough to an Oscar nomination for *To Leslie*, was keen to make a "comedy of grief". An opportunity afforded him by the material, which picks up with Bridget about to commemorate four years without her husband, Mark Darcy (Colin Firth). Although the opening sequence sees Firth show up, ostensibly to accompany Bridget to dinner — only to disappear when the front door opens. "I very much wanted that to hurt," he says. "And I apologise to people for whom it does hurt. Renée and Colin broke my heart, because they played it so lovingly."

KITCHEN DREAMING

With Bridget now a single mother of two, her life is a swirl of emotional chaos, nicely brought to life by Morris in the film's most stylish moment, a long single shot in which Bridget imagines virtually all the most important people in her life popping up in her kitchen to give her conflicting advice. Impressively, Morris pulled it off in the old-fashioned way: practically. "Shirley Henderson was hiding underneath the table," he laughs, "and Neil Pearson would hurtle in from another room. We did it over the course of six or seven hours, and this was take two." Only Emma Thompson, returning as the deadpan Dr Rawlings, couldn't be there on the day, and had to appear via movie magic as a reflection.

IS THAT...?

At one point, we're briefly introduced to a noisy neighbour of Bridget's, raising merry hell with her young children. And no, your eyes weren't deceiving you — that neighbour, Rebecca, is played by Isla Fisher. And we never see her again. Which led to all kinds of theories (not helped by Fisher's fifth billing on the theatrical poster) that she'd been cut out of the movie. "No, nothing happened," says Morris. "I should have known that, when you see Isla at the beginning of the movie, you're going to want more of her. It was really nothing more than a cameo, and to Isla's credit she said, 'I've always

loved the Bridget Jones movies, I'll do it,' and she came in and did that scene."

MAKING A SPLASH

Much of the first half of the film is dedicated to Bridget slowly but surely getting back onto the romantic roulette wheel, falling for Leo Woodall's Roxster, a much younger man who gives Morris an excuse to use Dinah Washington's version of the classic Noël Coward song, 'Mad About The Boy', over a sequence where Roxster dives into a swimming pool to rescue a small dog. "We thought we found the right place to use it," laughs Morris of the song. "There's definitely a nod and a wink to that Levi's commercial (*Nick Kamen stripping in a laundromat for 501s in 1985*), and a nod to *The Swimmer*, which is just bloody brilliant." Not to mention a nod to Colin Firth, who famously got similarly wet as another Darcy (Mr) in the BBC's 1995 *Pride And Prejudice*. "That's where that began. It's such a tradition."

A HEARTFELT MOMENT

The third film, *Bridget Jones's Baby*, did not feature Hugh Grant as Daniel Cleaver, the caddish third point of the series' earlier love triangle. Thankfully, he's back this time around, resurrected and given a storyline in which Daniel must probe matters of the heart both literal (he has a heart murmur) and metaphorical (he must reconcile with his estranged son). "Hugh's buy-in was just wildly important," says Morris. "You give him one moment in a hospital, for him to be honest and really look at her and not be funny. And you get it. You get that he's turned a corner."

LETTING GO

Mad About The Boy has more than its fair share of broad Bridget-style laughs. But it's perhaps the film's emotional honesty and sensitivity that caught the public consciousness. To wit, a scene on Hampstead Heath in which Bridget and her kids, Billy (Casper Knopf) and Mabel (Mila Jankovic), mark Mark's anniversary for a fifth time. Only this time, it feels that Bridget is finally on the verge of moving on, stepping out of frame to the left as the red balloons they've released into the sky exit to the right. It was the first shot Morris conceived of when he came on board, "a big, wide shot that is more sky than ground, like that Hokusai wave composition. It's not a religious thing, but that's where [Mark] is, and it's a dialogue between Mark and his family."

HOT FOR TEACHER

Bridget may have been mad about the boy, but by the film's end she's madder about the man, Chiwetel Ejiofor's slightly introspective teacher, Mr Wallaker. Throughout the film, their attraction has been on slow burn, finally bursting into flames with a nod to the first movie: a kiss in the snow. It was the final shot of principal photography, says Morris, which only added to the sense of occasion. "We wrapped at dawn and it was really emotional," he says. "We'd gone through this whole journey together and it ended with his confession of love. It was the perfect way to end."

BYE-BYE, BRIDGET

But not the perfect way to end the movie. "This film could have ended a number of ways," says Morris. "But I didn't want to just end the story with who she's going to be with, because that way you'd end with the kiss in the snow. It's not a love triangle. It's not about who got the girl. It's about, 'Is Bridget going to be okay?'" And to that end, the film's final shot is of Bridget, in an embrace with Mr Wallaker, smiling. And, crucially, looking up. "This is the end of an era," adds Morris. "It's the last *Bridget Jones*, and what I was trying to capture is, 'We keep the thing we've lost in our minds.' It was splitting that moment between Wallaker, right here and now, and what she will always have, which is Mark." (vg)

***BRIDGET JONES: MAD ABOUT THE BOY* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

How to pull off a heist

WRITER-DIRECTOR CHRISTIAN GUDEGAST ON STAGING **DEN OF THIEVES: PANTERA**'S NEAR-SILENT SKULDUGGERY

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

Main: Slavko (Salvatore Esposito), Big Nick (Gerard Butler), Donnie (O'Shea Jackson Jr) and Dragan (Orli Shuka) kit up. **Right:** Google Maps is for amateurs. **Far right:** The target.

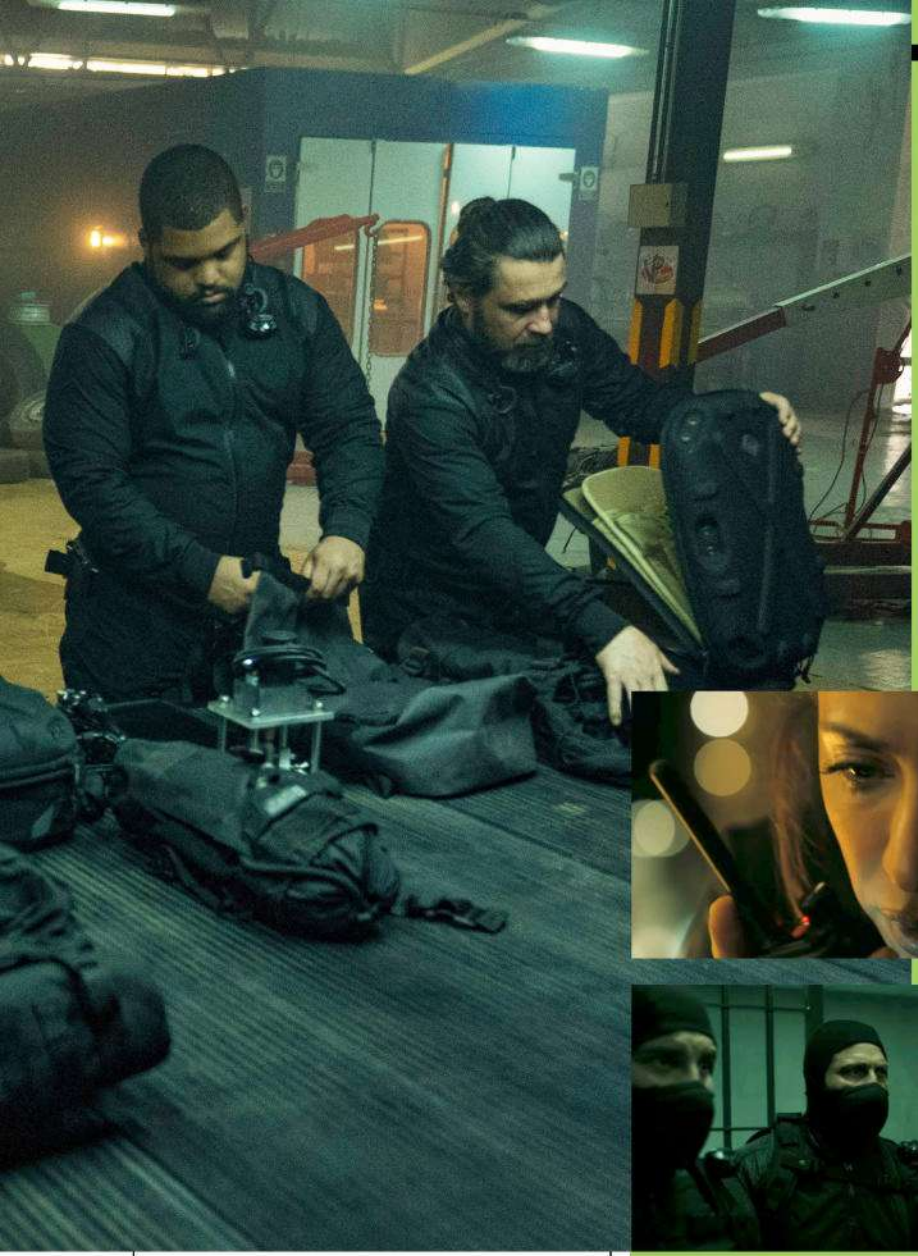
HEISTS ARE DIFFICULT. Prisons are full of people who found that out the hard way. Similarly, movie heists aren't a cakewalk either. And movie jail is filled with directors who found that out the hard way. In a world where Ethan Hunt can bounce into the Vatican, or the Kremlin, or an underwater vault, and use all kinds of hi-tech hocus-pocus to make off with the goods, it's somehow even more difficult to come up with an interesting, compelling movie heist that feels fresh, tense, and thrilling. It's even more difficult to do that when said heist is largely silent and set in France, instantly conjuring the spectre of *Rififi*.

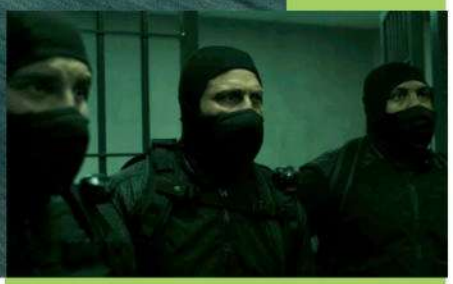
Yet that's what Christian Gudegast has managed to do in *Den Of Thieves: Pantera*, the much-delayed sequel to his 2018 thriller *Den Of Thieves*. That movie itself boasted an impressive robbery, in which the Federal Reserve in LA was relieved of some of its surplus cash. But the job that Gudegast pulls off in *Pantera* is arguably more impressive, as his previously warring protagonists, O'Shea Jackson Jr's Donnie Wilson and former LA County Sheriff 'Big Nick' O'Brien (Gerard Butler), team up to take down the World Diamond Center in Nice. And they must do so in complete silence, while navigating a maze of security cameras. It's a genuinely thrilling, inventive, 20-minute slice of pure tension, far removed from the crunching, *Heat*-inspired action of the first movie.

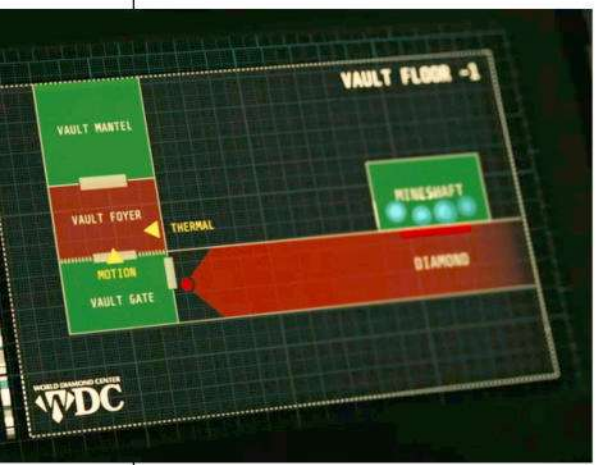
"It's more of an old-school heist film, like a French New Wave, *Rififi* kind of thing," Gudegast tells *Empire*, getting his *Rififi* retaliation in first. Jules Dassin's 1955 movie, and its still-sensational silent heist, was on his mind as he devised his own sequence, but not as much as you might think. "To a degree, yes," he says when *Empire* asks about the influence of *Rififi*. "But it's also the process of writing and doing the research. I did tons and tons of it. The main heist is based on an actual heist. I worked with all the thieves themselves, and the lead investigators on the crime. They were there the whole time with me, making sure everything was authentic."

The question of how, exactly, Gudegast got in touch with jewel thieves is one that must go unanswered for now. But from this research came the focus on the stealthy, silent approach. "It was all about the silence," agrees Gudegast. Having Big Nick, Donnie and the other members of their four-strong gang access the building by climbing across a giant pole onto its roof ("that's called a Vietnamese Pole Cross," reveals Gudegast), or abseil down lift shafts, or hustle from one room to another just before the security cameras' cycle picks them up, is manna from heaven for any filmmaker trying to generate tension. "Totally," he agrees. "What's the physical toll if you're actually robbing that place? And so it became this slow burn. It's exhausting, you have to remain very quiet through these very hermetically sealed environments. It's pretty extraordinary."

Don't try this at home, kids. These are pros. Also, while the *Pantera* heist is "pretty damn close" to the real thing, it's not a blueprint for budding baddies to start fleecing diamond-storage







Below, top to bottom: Evin Ahmad as Jovanna/ 'Cleopatra'; Ready to go; Quicker than the lift; Mid-mission; The stash.

facilities willy-nilly. "The technologies used are real," says Gudegast, "but all the various moments were from a combination of a few different heists. We put them together and built them in."

That technology is impressive. They don't go full Ethan Hunt, but at one point they do fool a security guard, who's watching a camera they haven't been able to avoid, by hiding behind a shield that bends light just enough to render them effectively invisible. It all seems a sci-fi touch

"I worked with real thieves and investigators."

out of left field, but Gudegast says otherwise. "Quantum Stealth is real," he says. And, sure enough, a Canadian company called Hyperstealth Biotechnology have been working on the technology for years — check YouTube for a video from 2019 in which their President/CEO, Guy Cramer, demonstrates its capabilities. "We had it with us," adds Gudegast. "We worked with actual companies that made the cameras. We talked to the safe manufacturers, and got down to, 'How would one actually do this?' Then it writes itself."

Only in a couple of areas did Gudegast deviate from his desire for authenticity. Although the film is set in Nice, it was shot in Tenerife, and some of the heist sequence was captured on a soundstage. The Vietnamese Pole Cross sequence was meant to be shot at an entirely different location, until said location fell through just a few days before filming was meant to take place. And when we say fell through, we mean it almost literally. "Nothing had been shot there before, and they never did an engineering analysis of the building," admits Gudegast. "And they realised we had too much weight on the roof, so we couldn't shoot that." Nobody wants to see Gerry Butler, or his stunt double (Danko Jordanov), crashing through a roof, Wile E. Coyote-style. "We ended up actually shooting that at our production office," adds the director. "The stunt team had been rehearsing at the other location for two months, and now we had a completely different height. It was very windy, it was brutal."

That sequence also sees Big Nick stranded inside the building, desperately seeking an exit, when the Vietnamese Pole Cross goes wrong on the way out. That sequence is very much a Gudegast invention. "We wanted Nick to have to operate on his own for a minute," says Gudegast. "He's doing this gangster bit, but he's never done it by himself."

If you've come this far, you'll know the movie ends with Big Nick in turmoil. For, as it turns out, his participation in the heist was just a smokescreen in order to finally ensnare Donnie and hand him over to the authorities. But, guilt-ridden by his part in taking down his former quarry, with whom he has subsequently bonded, Big Nick also appears to arrange for Donnie to be freed from prison by the Mafia, who promptly put him to work as their heister-in-chief. All of which means that *Den Of Thieves 3*, which Gudegast hopes to shoot next year, should deliver some more cracking criminality. "The world will open up more," he teases. "And we'll get into completely different kinds of heists. Different criminal groups are involved, and there's different ways of executing a heist..." Hold on to your valuables.

***DEN OF THIEVES: PANTERA* IS OUT NOW ON PRIME VIDEO**

The Ranking

Saturday Night Live movies

LIVE FROM *EMPIRE* TOWERS, IT'S FOUR WRITERS DISCUSSING *SNL*!

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

Marco Vittur

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
He took an upper decker in the master bathroom.

NICK DE SEMLYEN
Our President Baberaham Lincoln.

BECKY DARKE
Has never knowingly narfled the Garthok!

LIAM DEMPSEY
He's on a mission from God.

Chris: So, *Saturday Night Live* is 50 years old. What better way to celebrate than by ranking the 11 movies that have been spun off from sketches and characters made famous on the show? And folks, I don't want to beat around the bush here — they include some of the worst comedies ever made.

Nick: I would say there are a couple of films here that are entirely laugh-less. As in, I did not laugh once.

Becky: I disagree. I was really gearing myself up for stuff like *Superstar* and *The Ladies Man* to be absolute trash. But I had way more fun with them than I was expecting.

Liam: *The Blues Brothers* is one of my favourite films. It's in my top 20 movies of all time. I'm not a big *SNL* guy. But I've loved *Blues Brothers* since I was a kid.

Nick: *Blues Brothers* was the least well-formed on the show. John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd were into music and into the blues. They weren't doing comedy bits. And weirdly, the film is the most successful.

Liam: There's something so unique about *The Blues Brothers*. It was allowed to be its own thing.

Nick: It's got one of the greatest car chases — maybe *the* greatest — of all time. For something that started out as some people on a little New York stage, it's incredible.

Chris: The main reason I love *The Blues Brothers* is the music. I don't think it's a hilarious movie. It's a chucklesome movie. It's the music that got me into it. I played the soundtrack album religiously.

Nick: It makes me laugh loads, all the way through.

Becky: For me, it's not laugh-out-loud in the way that *Wayne's World* is. It's too cool to be funny. It's a long movie, and it feels it.

Nick: The sequel is longer than *The Brutalist*. It needed an interval.

Chris: It's basically just a rough photocopy of the first film. But I can't hate a film with that soundtrack.

Nick: It starts with one of them learning about the other's death, and gets less funny from there.

Becky: I just don't think it has any of the charm. Even the songs have no magic.

Liam: The only bit I like is when John Goodman lifts up the bonnet of the car and the little kid has got an entire makeshift bedroom. That's the kind of inspired surrealism you see in the first film, but that's 30 seconds of the movie.

Chris: You'd have thought that *Blues Brothers* would have led to a glut of *SNL* movies. But it wasn't until 12 years later that we got *Wayne's World*. As a pure comedy, I don't think this can be beaten in terms of *SNL* movies.

Nick: Is this the most quotable film of all time?

Becky: "Schwing!" will never not be funny.

Chris: No way.

Becky: Yes way!

Nick: I'm a *Bill & Ted* guy. But when I rewatched *Wayne's World* this time, I was blown away by how many iconic moments there were, and how funny it is. The hit rate is incredible.

Chris: This is a Mike Myers creation and you can see a lot of the building blocks of stuff he would go on to do in *Austin Powers*. It's a very self-aware movie. And the sequel is a sequel that knows it's a sequel.

Liam: I saw *Wayne's World 2* in the cinema and I remember hating it. I did like it a lot more watching it now.

Nick: It's not as good.

Chris: Let's talk about *Coneheads*, another Dan Aykroyd joint.

Liam: I'd always avoided it, as I find the Coneheads to be repulsive. But actually I think it's pretty fucking funny.

Chris: I saw this in Canada when it came out, had a good time with it, didn't think about it again until now, watched it again, and had a really good time with it again.

Nick: I was delighted by it. I started writing down Aykroydian lines, and then just kept going and going.

Chris: "May I have 55 words with you?"

Nick: That absolutely killed me. It's Aykroyd flying his freak flag. It's incredible.

Chris: I can't wait to see it again in another 30 years. Let's move on to 1994, which was a big year for Julia Sweeney. She appeared in *Pulp Fiction*, and then there was the high point of writing and starring in *It's Pat*. The gag with this character is that Pat is of indeterminate gender. That's the joke, folks.

Nick: There's another *Pulp Fiction* connection. It was co-written by Stephen Hibbert, aka The Gimp. And Tarantino did some work on the script at some point. It's unclear how

much of what he wrote is left.
Liam: Cancel Tarantino. This is one of the worst films I've ever seen. It's horribly offensive.
Chris: You can't spell "problematic" without "Pat".
Becky: It's so unfunny. It's badly written, horrifically performed. It's a charm vacuum.
Nick: I did not laugh a single time. I found this a harrowing experience. It was like watching *Jacob's Ladder*.
Liam: I had to watch in 20-minute instalments. It's a 78-minute movie. It was making me genuinely angry.
Nick: *The Ladies Man* is another single-joke movie that's marginally more successful. But I did not get on with it either. Tim Meadows is like a live-action Pepé Le Pew in it. And they just don't know what to do with the character, because he's a sex pest, essentially.
Becky: I kind of loved it. I should be the person who's offended by this film, but I wasn't. I don't think he is a sex pest!
Liam: I did like Will Ferrell and his gang of cucks going around, singing like they're in a Broadway musical.
Chris: Will Ferrell's the best thing in this movie. He's in three of these movies, and this is the only one that uses him well. *Superstar* is an interesting one, but not terribly funny.
Becky: I enjoyed this. It's got that almost *But I'm A Cheerleader* Technicolor hyper-realism. I really like how this movie looks.
Chris: It's well-directed, by Bruce McCulloch from *The Kids In The Hall*. I just wish it had better gags and a more likeable lead character.
Nick: Not only did I not find her funny, I couldn't understand why anyone would.
Liam: I found it kind of anti-funny.
Chris: The last of the Will Ferrell movies is *A Night At The Roxbury*. I think this movie is without merit. It's truly one of the worst movies ever made.
Nick: That's really harsh. I found it extremely amiable. They play Haddaway's 'What Is Love?' 13 times in 80 minutes, and it's still not enough.
Becky: I had a surprisingly good time. By the end I was pretty much grinning from ear to ear. It's a one-gag pony, but I found it charming.
Chris: Next up is Harold Ramis' *Stuart Saves His Family*, which was his follow-up to *Groundhog Day*. He was the driving force behind taking an *SNL* sketch about a guy called Stuart Smalley, a self-help guru played by Al Franken, and turning it into a dramedy I'm guessing none of us had heard of before this, let alone seen.
Liam: It's like something from Alexander Payne, except for the main character. You plop this *SNL* caricature into the middle of a reasonably serious family drama. And I just tuned into it. This film's actually quite brave.
Nick: I had a similar experience. I didn't really get on with the character, it's a film about property inheritance, and I felt quite bored. And then I got pulled into it.
Becky: It's surprisingly sweet and poignant by the end.
Chris: It's okay. Best thing about it is the *SNL* appearance Franken did as Stuart a few weeks after it flopped, bemoaning people who saw *Bad Boys* and *Dumb And Dumber* — two objectively funnier movies — instead of it. Last up is *MacGruber*, an action-movie spoof.
Becky: There are other movies that have done the same thing better. But his monologue about why Val Kilmer's character hates him is one of the funniest things I've ever seen. I was dying.
Nick: Christopher Nolan loves this film. I always enjoy imagining him watching one of the two sex scenes.
Chris: The scene that I love is the first sex scene, in which Will Forte seduces Kristen Wiig to 'Broken Wings' by Mr. Mister, surrounded by candles and doves, and then it hard cuts to to him grinding and groaning away on top of her. That hard cut reduces me to tears of laughter. Greatest sex scene of all time.
Nick: I really like the MacGruber sketches, but a little bit of MacGruber goes a long way.
Chris: Alright, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?
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THE TOP TEN

1

THE BLUES BROTHERS
(1980)

=1

WAYNE'S WORLD
(1992)

3

CONEHEADS
(1993)

4

WAYNE'S WORLD 2
(1993)

5

MACGRUBER
(2010)

6

STUART SAVES HIS FAMILY
(1995)

7

THE LADIES MAN
(2000)

8

A NIGHT AT THE ROXBURY
(1998)

9

BLUES BROTHERS 2000
(1998)

10

SUPERSTAR
(1999)

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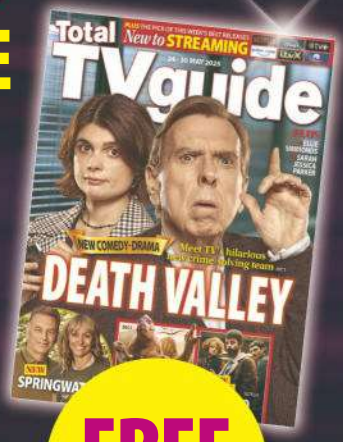

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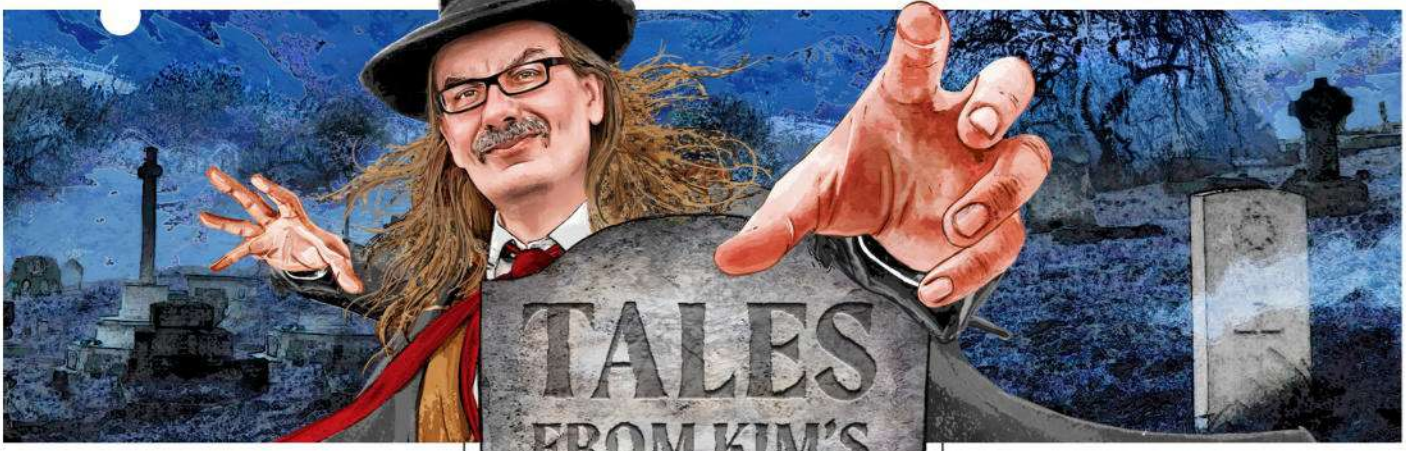


TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

SITCOM VAMPIRES AND MASS WEREWOLVES

VAMPIRES AND WEREWOLVES, our favourite monsters, are always with us. *Nosferatu* and *Wolf Man* — remakes of remakes — have scared up box-office coin in cinemas before reaching your home screen on disc or via streaming platform, boosted by the glory of what VHS boxes used to call a "major theatrical release". But they haunt another part of the magazine. Less promoted, more affordable creatures are the remit of this column.

Vampires are represented by *The Radleys*, a 'Sky Original' which got advertised on bus stops. Based on Matt Haig's novel, which read a lot like a screen treatment, it's about a family of bloodsuckers who have resolved to be 'abstainers' and live a normal, non-predatory life in a small Yorkshire town. Peter (Damian Lewis), a GP, and Helen (Kelly Macdonald), busy in the local book group, haven't even told their kids — recent vegan Clara (Bo Bragason) and weedy Rowan (Harry Baxendale) — what they are, though explanations have to be forthcoming when Clara instinctively bites the throat out of a rapey teenage boy and discovers that she's not really suited to be a vegan.

Needing help getting rid of the body and coping with the kids, the family turn to the worst person possible — Peter's irresponsible bastard twin-brother Will (Lewis, having more fun), who lives in a van and is perfectly okay with regular murders. Without Lewis and Macdonald — and, in a supporting bit that's not quite worthy of her, Sophia Di Martino of *Loki* — *The Radleys* would be thin, if gory. 'Normal' monster families have been a thing since *The Munsters* and a sub-plot about the Van Helsing next door seems lifted from CBBC's *Young Dragula* series. But Lewis and Macdonald are priceless as the dull parents who often wake up smeared with blood, to the despair of their kids. Oddly, the most ostensibly sympathetic character commits arguably the most indefensible act — an interesting angle, not well explored. It might benefit from a sequel going further into the darkness.

Werewolves are represented by — ah — *Werewolves*, streaming and on disc, from busy, efficient schlock guy Steven C. Miller (*The Aggression Scale, Under The Bed, Silent Night* etc). Vampire apocalypses (cf: *I Am Legend*) are common, lycanthrope versions less so — like *The Radleys*, there's a hint that this will be a franchise if enough folk lay eyeballs on the set-up movie. A year ago, an unprecedented supermoon turned a billion people into werewolves for one night with untold casualties. Tonight, it's happening again. Wolf-moon scientist/action-hero guy Frank Grillo leaves his family shut into a fortified home to go to work at the study-the-monsters project... then things get hairy all over town. As the casting of grizzled Grillo suggests, this boils down to *The Purge* but with werewolves — which is recommendation enough. *The Howling*-type suitmation and stretchy-mask monster effects give Grillo fangfaces to punch and victims furry presences to scream at/spurt blood on. Once it's set up its ambitious premise it gets predictable, but schlockiness is part of the appeal.

Top to bottom: Damian Lewis has a fangtastic time in *The Radleys*; A werewolf in, you guessed it, *Werewolves* (2024).

Signature, Sky

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

COLD WALLET
(DIGITAL)

Bankrupted dupes Raúl Castillo, Tony Cavalero and Melonie Diaz invade the snowbound mansion of cryptobro Josh Brener to get their imaginary money back — but the hustler has more tricks to play. A contemporary thriller which plays suspense games with progress bars on phone screens.

THE DEAD THING
(DIGITAL)

A disturbing elaboration of a joke premise — what if you were ghosted by a ghost? LA single Blu Hunt hooks up on a dating app with barista Ben Smith-Petersen — and is irked that a) he forgets her immediately, b) she sees him with another chick, and c) he's dead.

MOM
(DIGITAL)

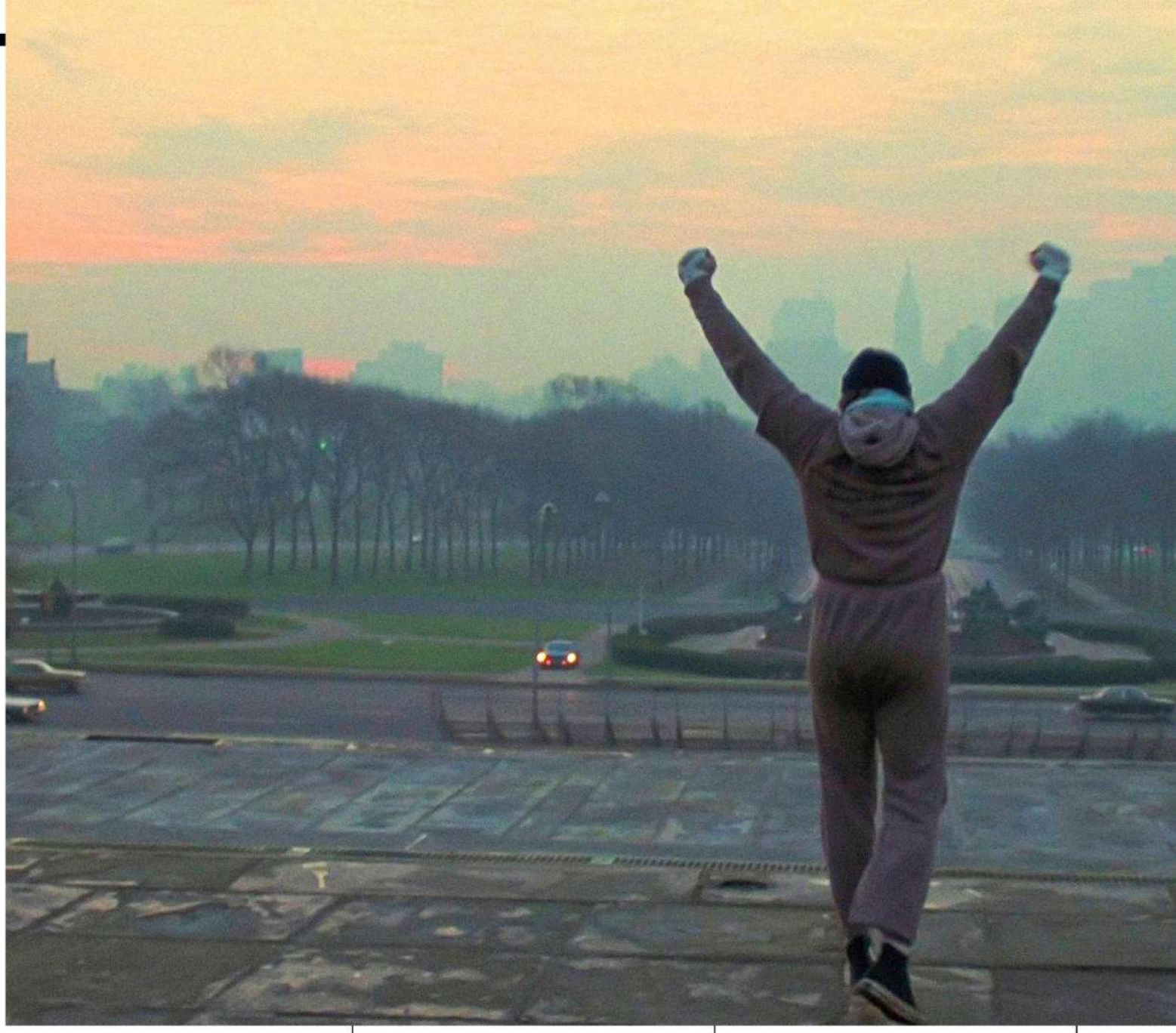
Adam O'Brien's movie has a knockout performance from Emily Hampshire as a new mum haunted by a ghost son who's nastier yet less demanding than the real baby. A much darker take on motherhood than *Nightbitch*, *Mom* shades effectively from indie chamber to unrelenting scare story.

RIPPY
(DVD/BLU-RAY/4K/DIGITAL)

A nine-foot zombie kangaroo menaces an Australian town in this late-in-the-day *Jaws* riff, which distantly evokes the old TV show *Skippy*. Too much time is spent on Sheriff Tess Haubrich's daddy issues and Michael Biehn's Vietnam trauma, though maybe more CG killer 'roo wouldn't help.

THE THICKET
(DIGITAL)

A Western based on a Joe R. Lansdale novel, Elliott Lester's film offers a high degree of *Unforgiven*-style grim grit with surreal touches. Sideshow sharpshooter Peter Dinklage and Levon Hawke rescue Esmé Creed-Miles from outlaw Juliette Lewis (in a career-highlight villain role).



STORY OF THE SHOT

Rocky

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO STALLONE'S CROWD-PLEASING CLIMB

WORDS **IAN FREER**

THE ORIGIN

Nearly 50 years on, Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa running up the 72 stone steps of the Philadelphia Museum Of Art remains one of cinema's great punch-the-air moments. While some reports suggest the scene was inspired by Stallone's teenage years spent in Philly or the location being spotted on a scouting recce, the received wisdom is the idea most likely began with cinematographer Garrett Brown, who used the steps for a proof of concept for his new-fangled camera rig the Steadicam, a mount that creates a fluid, almost floating motion.

"I made shots at my farmhouse and then took it to the grandest outdoor staircase around — the Philadelphia Art Museum," recalls Brown. "Once my final 35mm prototype was completed, our 'impossible shots' demo included another pass up and down those grand steps, which was seen by hotshots all around the world, including director John Avildsen, who fortuitously was prepping *Rocky*." Seventy-two small steps for a camera operator became a giant leap for cinematography.

THE SHOT

Producer Irwin Winkler has vivid memories of Brown turning up on set with his unwieldy contraption. "This big, strong guy came around with this strange-looking rig," he recalls. "We had no other way to get the camera to go up the stairs with Stallone, because these stairs were pretty steep. To put down a dolly track would have been impossible."

The shot was captured during the early winter months of 1976, and was originally going to see Stallone carry his dog Butkus up the steps as a show of Rocky's new-found strength. "Apparently [the actor and the dog] came from Los Angeles to Philadelphia on the train, and Sly was stuck in a small compartment with Butkus, who had a flatulence problem," recalls Winkler. Farting wasn't the only issue with the shot. Butkus was a 140lb bullmastiff and, after one take, Stallone realised the dog was just too heavy. The actor ultimately did the shot solo, followed by Brown and Avildsen in hot pursuit. "Avildsen attempted to keep up carrying my wire-attached Akai 1/4" video recorder, and fell several times,

Getty Images, Landmark, Sony

with a signature squawk that made us pull up and abort the shot," says Brown. Not exactly gonna fly now.

THE LEGACY

The moment transformed the picture. "I think the first time we really realised how special it [the film] was was when we were editing it and Bill Conti put in the music for the running-up-the-stairs training sequence," recalls Winkler. "That's when it started becoming more than just this little movie we were making." The steps subsequently became known as 'The Rocky Steps' and host a bronze statue of Balboa, arms aloft, at the bottom. "Astonishingly, those steps remain the second-favourite tourist attraction in Philly, and an ongoing delight," says Brown. "Crowds still run up those steps in every season of the year." In fact, they attract four million wannabe Rockys annually. With or without a trumping pooch.

***ROCKY* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

INSTANT TRIVIA

1

Brown's initial Steadicam test on the steps featured his then girlfriend (and later wife) Ellen bounding up and down them, in his words "like a gazelle".

2

Prior to *Rocky*, Brown first used his contraption on *Bound For Glory* (an Oscar-winner for cinematography) and *Marathon Man*.

3

Stallone repeated the run in *Rocky II* and *III* plus series swansong *Rocky Balboa* — in the last, Balboa lifts up his dog Punchy at the top, played by Rusty, a ten-year-old male terrier mix. Much lighter than Butkus.

4

The scene has been parodied in everything from *The Simpsons*, *The Fresh Prince Of Bel-Air* and *In Her Shoes* to *The Nutty Professor* and *Shazam!*.

Main: Hands up who created one of the greatest cinematic sequences of all time. **Right:** Paul Feig.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

RYAN KEMP

DIRECTOR PAUL FEIG ON WHY HE PAID TRIBUTE TO A REAL GHOSTBUSTER

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PAUL FEIG CREDITS are not like normal credits. Not for him a wall of black with line after line after line (after line) of white text. The credits on Feig's movies are colourful, playful affairs, often with cutouts of characters from the movie, or some added-value text to ensure the viewer doesn't nod off. "It's still the movie," says Feig. "I want people to watch the credits, and to see all the people that worked on a movie. So let's make it a fun thing." He laughs. "I keep waiting for somebody to notice how much work we put into our end-credit sequences. Thank you."

Not at all. But it's not the only thing we noticed. When it comes to the Special Thanks sections in his movies, Feig's approach has been somewhat black and white. Most of his movies, whether it's *Spy* or *Another Simple Favour*, have Special Thanks sections, but of the prosaic 'The Producers Would Like To Thank' variety. Except for his 2016 reboot of *Ghostbusters*, that is. After the usual gratitude doled out to the likes of City Of Boston, or City Of Weymouth, MA, comes a line, all on its own: "Very Special Thanks To GB Superfan Ryan Kemp For His Support And Dedication".

"Ryan was the sweetest guy," says Feig, who recalls first meeting him when he went to a convention right as the online hate campaign against his *Ghostbusters* was at its Zuul-ish zenith. "I was like, 'Am I gonna get beaten up? What's going to happen?' And there was a guy sitting in the front, completely decked out in all his *Ghostbusters* stuff, and he comes up and says, 'I just want to thank you so much for keeping the franchise alive.'" That was Ryan Kemp, who sadly passed away in 2015, following a car crash. "It just devastated me," adds Feig. "He was the nicest, gentlest soul. To this day I get really choked up about it. So I was like, 'I have to put this in there.'" **CHRIS HEWITT**

***GHOSTBUSTERS* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

Time Capsule

Jason Isaacs

TALKING WAISTCOASTS, WIZARDS AND *THE WHITE LOTUS* WITH THE BELOVED BRIT

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

"IT'S FUNNY WHEN people come up and they say, 'Do you remember...?'" says Jason Isaacs. "As if I will have forgotten the film I made where I was away somewhere for months." Isaacs is, in many ways then, the perfect Time Capsule candidate. He's had a rich and varied career that stretches over decades, has a plentiful supply of anecdotes, and has a mind like a steel trap. There's just one problem. "I do have a very poor memory for faces," he admits. Thankfully, he saves the day. "I will recognise my own face." Phew.

SMOOTHIE CRIMINAL
THE WHITE LOTUS (2025)

"I've spoken so much about *The White Lotus* the past eight weeks. A lot of my memory, when I see that photograph, is what it was like being Timothy Ratliff. He's incredibly unhappy. I remember holding my son in my arms and feeling like my world had come to an end. I love Sam [Nivola]. Patrick [Schwarzenegger], Sam and Sarah Catherine [Hook] became my kids. We still talk all the time. I love that boy, Sam. And I look at that and think of how broken I was with him in my arms. When you see Tim on the boat at the end, he's accepting of his fate. He's the character least curious about any kind of spiritual enlightenment, and is the one who comes the closest to the Buddhist ideal. That's Mike White's genius."

EVENT MOVIE
EVENT HORIZON (1997)

(***Empire***: *"You're out of focus here."*) "So was I, for the entire film. Paul Anderson, the director of this, is such a lovely man. He said, 'Look, these are the characters — do something with it.' [My character] D.J. was the doctor, and I came up with this waistcoat, which is actually a fishing waistcoat, with a billion gadgets. I love the fact that you can see I'm smoking. I said, 'In the future, they'll have a pill, and smoking won't be bad for you.' He said, 'Great idea!'"

THE QUIET QUARTET
MASS (2021)

"I love this movie so much. It was much appreciated and won a bunch of awards, but it didn't find the audience. People wrongly thought that it was going to be depressing, and actually it's maybe the most uplifting film I've ever made. It's about the power of forgiveness. It was such an intense experience. We shot it over ten days, and I remember looking at Ann [Dowd] and Reed [Birney] and Martha [Plimpton] and thinking, 'This is some of the best acting I've ever seen. I'd better pull my fucking socks up.'"

Alamy, EOne, Imago, Sky, Warners

PRISONER OF AD-LIB
HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS (2002)

"My first proper day was this scene with the late, great Richard Harris, who I was utterly in awe of, and Daniel [Radcliffe], who I was not yet in awe of. [Daniel] did something remarkable. The last shot was of me leaving. I said, 'I think I should say something. Lucius is such a proud man. He's not going to leave without regaining some dignity.' [The director] Chris [Columbus] said, 'You come up with something.' So I said, 'Let us hope that Mr Potter will always be around to save the day.' And Daniel went, 'Don't worry, I will be.' He got the last line. I thought, 'Fuck, he's good!'"

A CLOSE SHAVE
PETER PAN (2003)

"This is maybe one of the best films I've ever made. In the shooting of it, Jeremy [Sumpter, who played Peter] started off coming up to my sternum and ended up being as tall as me. This is one of the few moments in our final fight when we're standing on the ground. We had to do the whole fight in the air so you couldn't see how tall he'd got. The sword fight went on for months. Fake swords, which are rubber with a thin metal inside, are very heavy. Aluminium swords are very light, but very dangerous. Jeremy's dad, Gary, came over and said, 'Look, Jeremy can't fight with the fake sword anymore; we need to use aluminium ones.' I said, 'I'm not doing that. It's dangerous.' So we did fight with the rubber swords. Next take, Jeremy smacked me in the face. Pretty much knocked me out. But had it been the aluminium sword, you'd be talking to a stump."

BASEMENT BARGAINING
THE OA (2016-'19)

"Oh, God. I spoke to Zal Batmanglij yesterday, and Brit [Marling]. I get stopped and talked to more about *The OA* than anything I've ever been in. When it was cancelled, we were heartbroken. We're still incredibly hopeful about finishing the story. I remember this moment. I remember the basement. I remember not wanting her, feeling a sense of dread. I'm falling in love, and I want her to love me and I feel such a sense of longing and fear and hatred and confusion. I'm often thinking a lot of things that the audience may never get. And by the way, if you look carefully at his waistcoat, that's my personal homage to D.J. from *Event Horizon*."

OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE
GREEN ZONE (2010)

"[Director] Paul Greengrass is an old friend of mine. He called me and said, 'Mate, what are you doing tomorrow? Come to Morocco, there's a part in my film.' I get there and Paul goes, 'Let's shoot the scene.' I hadn't looked at the script. I wasn't ready. And I panicked. I went and got a costume on, and he said, 'Bring the helicopters around.' So I got in [one], we were hanging out the side, held by a bungee cord. There were five guys in there who I got to know very well — serious soldiers. On one take we were 50 metres up in the air, and I unclipped my bungee cord, we landed, and I jumped off, and pushed Matt [Damon] down to the ground. That night I'm with the soldiers in the bar. I said, 'When have you been most scared?' They said, 'This afternoon, when you unclipped the bungee up in the air. You don't unclip until you hit the ground!' I didn't know that."

THE SELFIE OF STALIN
THE DEATH OF STALIN (2017)

"I remember this moment. They released it as a still from the film, and it's me taking a selfie in the toilet! I was in awe of all my comedy gods being there, and then they'd say, 'Action!', and I'd grab them by the balls and slap them around the face. (***Empire***: *"Do you take a lot of photos on set?"*) I used to shoot with a proper camera, an SLR, then print them, cut them up and make a poster. When digital came along, I thought, 'They'll be even better.' I've hundreds of thousands of backstage shots. A lot of candid photographs that people might not want released."

THE WHITE LOTUS IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND SKY/NOW

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

STAR TREK MOVIES

1 Recently, a straight-to-streaming movie became the first *Trek* film to feature neither a Kirk nor a Picard. What was its name?

2 What is the highest-grossing *Star Trek* movie so far?

3 J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* (2009) is the only *Trek* movie to win an Oscar. In which category?

4 That movie deviates quite significantly from *Trek* canon in a couple of ways. Not least the destruction of which iconic *Trek* planet?

5 Kirstie Alley played Saavik in *Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan*, but didn't return for the follow-up, *The Search For Spock*. Who took over?

6 *The Wrath Of Khan* was a sequel to which episode of the 1960s TV show?

7 Spock dies at the end of *Khan*. (Fear not, he comes back.) What song plays at his funeral?

8 Spoiler alert! In *Star Trek: Generations*, what are Kirk's... final... words?

9 In which movie does Scotty (James Doohan) declare that he knows the Enterprise like the back of his hand, only to immediately bang his head on a doorframe?

10 What names are missing here? Robert Wise, Nicholas Meyer, Leonard Nimoy, Leonard Nimoy, William Shatner, [REDACTED], David Carson, Jonathan Frakes, Jonathan Frakes, [REDACTED], J.J. Abrams, J.J. Abrams, Justin Lin.

11 In *Star Trek Beyond*, The Beastie Boys' 'Sabotage' plays a key role in the third act. How is it described by Sofia Boutella's Jaylah?

12 Tom Hardy made an early appearance in *Star Trek: Nemesis*. Who did he play?

13 Which '90s heartthrob has an uncredited cameo — as a young Starfleet officer — in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*?

14 Which *Trek* film had the tagline, 'Resistance Is Futile'?

15 'Enterprising Young Men' is a track title from the score of the 2009 *Star Trek*. Who was the composer?

16 *In Star Trek: Insurrection*, Patrick Stewart, Michael Dorn and Brent Spiner perform which Gilbert & Sullivan song?

17 In which film does the crew of the USS Enterprise board the actual aircraft carrier of the same name?

18 Who appeared in the 2009 *Star Trek*'s memorable opening sequence as the doomed father of Chris Pine's James T. Kirk?

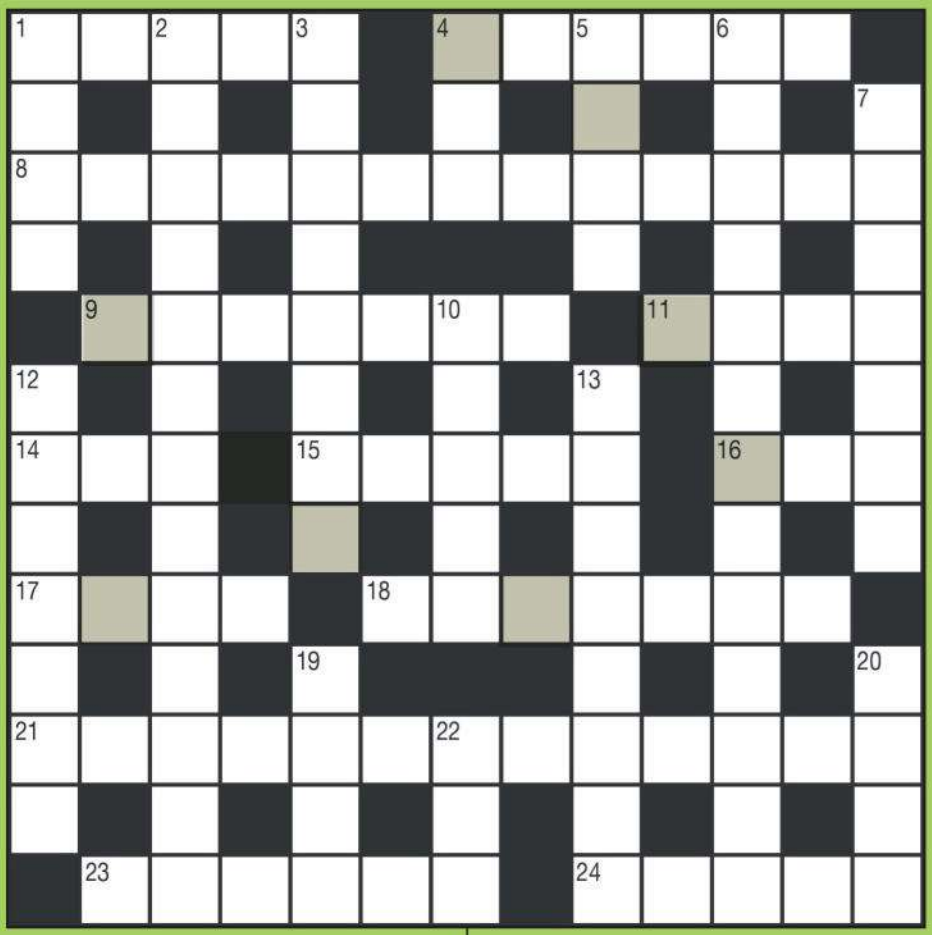
19 In *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013), Benedict Cumberbatch plays Khan Noonien Singh. But he also goes by another name. What is it?

20 Who was the first member of the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* cast to appear in a *Star Trek* movie? Hint: it was before *Star Trek: Generations*.

ANSWERS **1** *Star Trek: Section 31* **2** *Star Trek Into Darkness*, with $467 million worldwide **3** Best Makeup **4** Vulcan **5** Robin Curtis **6** 'Space Seed' (which aired in February 1967) **7** 'Amazing Grace', played on the bagpipes **8** "Oh my." **9** *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* **10** Nicholas Meyer, who directed *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, and Stuart Baird, who directed *Star Trek: Nemesis* **11** "Beats and shouting" **12** Villain Shinzon **13** Christian Slater (he's a big *Trek* fan; plus, his mother, Mary Jo Slater, was casting director on the movie) **14** *Star Trek: First Contact* **15** Michael Giacchino **16** 'A British Tar' **17** *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* **18** Chris Hemsworth **19** John Harrison **20** Michael Dorn, who played Worf's grandad in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*

CBS, Imago, Paramount

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 *Fast & Furious* presented him and Shaw (5)
4 It links Ingmar Bergman's *Sonata* and *Emma.* director de Wilde (6)
8 In which Eddie Murphy is Billy Ray Valentine (7,6)
9 Peck, who starred in *The Omen*, *To Kill A Mockingbird* and… (7)
11/19 Down … a 1962 thriller with Robert Mitchum (4,4)
14 Spanish horror remade as *Quarantine* (3)
15 *Ghost* — (Nicolas Cage movie) (5)
16 See **4 Down**
17 Paul, who's been in films involving ants and unicorns (4)
18 "There is no gene for the human spirit," proclaimed its tagline (7)
21 Iconic sound effect used as a movie in-joke when someone dies or falls (7,6)
23 Her name is Tippi (6)
24 Reddick, who'll see you at The Continental (5)

DOWN

1 Planet on which tauntauns and wampas live (4)
2 Her film debut was in *Betty Blue* (8,5)
3 Doug Liman comedy with Vince Vaughn (8)
4/16 Across He directed *Hulk* and *Brokeback Mountain* (3,3)
5 Heath Ledger appeared in a knight's one (4)
6 He's Spinal Tap's David St Hubbins (7,6)
7 Acting dynasty, some of whom use the surname Sheen (7)
10 Mitchell from *Melinda And Melinda* and *Pitch Black* (5)
12 Tarantino in a Tarantino film or Hugh Bonneville in *Paddington* (2,5)
13 *The Fourth* — (Pierce Brosnan film) (8)
19 See **11 Across**
20 Bob Hoskins played him in Steven Spielberg's *Hook* (4)
22 Folk horror from *28 Years Later* writer Alex Garland (3)

COMPETITION

WIN!

DESTINATION: STAR TREK BOARD GAMES

CALLING ALL TREKKERS! Bit of a scoop in Crossword Corner this issue, as we have the first glimpse of the brand-new *Destination: Star Trek — The Next Generation Interstellar Board Game*. Reliving the adventures of the Enterprise-D and her crew, the assignment is pretty simple — plan the best route around the galaxy and complete your mission before the other players. And yet... there will be complications and hazards to be overcome: malfunctioning holodecks, sentient computers and Klingon civil war. Only the best Starfleet officer will win! *Destination: Star Trek* will be boldly going on sale in autumn — and we have ten copies to give away before it's available to buy. To enter, crack the crossword and follow the instructions below. Live long and prosper!

***DESTINATION: STAR TREK — THE NEXT GENERATION INTERSTELLAR BOARD GAME* WILL BE AVAILABLE TO BUY IN AUTUMN FROM WWW.DESTINATIONBOARDGAMES.COM**

COMPETITION ENDS 30 JUNE

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 30 June. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

SUMMER'S ANSWERS ACROSS: **3** Paris, **6** Annette, **8** Trailer, **9** Rabbits, **11** Things, **12** Beca, **14** Wyler, **16** Poor, **18** Colors, **19** Traffic, **21** Vertigo, **22** Dolores, **23** Naked. DOWN: **1** Unsane, **2** Webb, **3** Pets, **4** Reacher, **5** Silencio, **7** TriStar, **10** Tony, **12** Batcave, **13** Children, **14** Warwick, **15** Ever, **17** Oliver!, **19** Todd, **20** Foot. **ANAGRAM** LUNA BLAISE

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 1 July or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Ten winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Prizes will be delivered after September. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winners' personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

Prizes courtesy of Rachel Lowe Games & Puzzles

CLASSIC SCENE

THE BOMBINGS

The Battle Of Algiers

CHOSEN BY
KEVIN MACDONALD
(DIRECTOR)

Kevin Macdonald: "*The Battle Of Algiers* is endlessly inspiring to me. The scene I always go back to is the scene of the women from the Casbah who've got bombs in their handbags and leave them at various sites. The bombs go off, and you see the devastation, you see the blood. It's a very pro-Algerian independence film, but there's such humanity given to the French, to the victims of this moment. It feels so real."

INT. CAFÉ — DAY

Halima (Fusia El Kader), one of three women who have been given bombs hidden in bags, enters a bustling café bar. Insistent drumming is heard on the soundtrack. She goes to the bar.

HALIMA: A Coke, please.

A bespectacled man sitting at the bar notices, and is quite taken by, her.

BESPECTACLED MAN: Would you like to sit down?

She nods, and he moves aside. She takes his seat. The barman gives her a Coke. She drinks it. Looks around, at the various customers chatting. A young boy licks an ice cream. Halima glances at the clock. 5.36pm. She looks around again and then pushes her bag under the seats at the bar.

BARMAN: One hundred francs, please.

Halima pays and goes to leave.

BESPECTACLED MAN: Leaving, miss?

HALIMA: Yes, sir.

BESPECTACLED MAN: What a pity.

She leaves.

INT. MILK BAR — DAY

In another bar nearby, Fathia (Samia Kerbash) is standing by a jukebox watching customers dance and drink. She sways a little, then pushes something behind the jukebox with her foot before leaving.

INT. AIRPORT — DAY

A third woman walks casually into the airport, picks up a magazine, sits down next to a couple, and nudges her bag under the seat. Over the tannoy, a delay to a flight to Paris is being announced. We see the clock: 5.41pm.

INT. CAFÉ — DAY

Back in the café, the customers are having a good time. The barman asks the bespectacled man if he'd like another martini. The man says no. The camera pans down to the bag beneath the bar. The clock ticks on to 5.44pm. The drumming begins again as we see a series of faces. Including the little boy again. Then, as the clock hits 5.50pm...

EXT. STREET — DAY

The bomb explodes, startling passers-by and bystanders. Cars squeal to a halt in the street. People run into the ruins of the bar. A bloodied man staggers out. Chaos reigns. Dead bodies lie in the rubble.

INT. MILK BAR — DAY

In the milk bar, many customers go to the door to see what all the fuss is about, as fire engines and ambulances roar past. Someone remarks that a propane tank must have exploded. After a few seconds, the customers go back into the milk bar and resume dancing. And then the bomb planted by the jukebox explodes, sending customers flying across the room. Screams ring out and are quickly replaced by eerie silence. People rush into the milk bar to carry out the wounded and dead.

More fire engines arrive, seen through a thick pall of smoke. As more emergency services arrive, the third bomb — the one at the airport — can be heard going off in the distance.

HEROES AREN'T HARD TO FIND!

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